

DISSERTATION

DANCING IN THE DESERT: ELECTRONIC DANCE MUSIC FESTIVALS,
CARNIVALESQUE RHETORICS OF DISORIENTATION, AND PERFORMATIVE
PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

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ABSTRACT

DANCING IN THE DESERT: ELECTRONIC DANCE MUSIC FESTIVALS, CARNIVALESQUE RHETORICS OF DISORIENTATION, AND PERFORMATIVE PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

Electronic dance music (EDM) creates communities whose members negotiate and renegotiate the politics of public performances of identity. In this dissertation, I ask “How do EDM festivals function as temporary communities that rhetorically construct the performance of gender and sexuality?” I argue that EDM uses a rhetorical strategy I call disorientation. I detail the ways disorientation helps EDM festival attendees, known as “ravers” or “festies,” inhabit liminal spaces and transgress the patriarchal, heteronormative, white supremacist, and capitalist expressions of gender and sexuality that are dominant in the outside world via rhetorics of the carnivalesque. I also develop an approach to rhetorical field methods I call Performative Participant Observation. I demonstrate Performative Participant Observation in this dissertation and argue that similar methods would be useful for scholars interested in studying ephemeral and public performances of gender and sexuality as well as performances of the carnival

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION: CARNIVAL, RHETORICAL FIELD METHODS AND MODES OF CONDUCTING INTERSECTIONAL CRITICISM *IN SITU*

Surrounded by these pounding bass notes—under the punishing desert sun—cloaked in layers and layers of leather, fringe, buckles, and chains, I find myself easily confused. But then again. .

. I forget that's the whole point. (Nocturnal Wonderland, 2021)¹

Contemporary music festivals are massive events where people come together as temporary communities that perform gendered and sexual identities while participating in several days of immersive merriment, celebration, and—importantly, musical experiences. They also have an incredible reach in contemporary popular culture. Well-known festivals like Outside Lands and Life is Beautiful regularly gross tens of millions of dollars in 2-3 days, and top-selling festivals like Coachella and Lalapalooza draw crowds of hundreds of thousands year after year.² Mid-level music festivals like Nocturnal Wonderland, Beyond Wonderland, and Hard Summer, run by industry giants like Insomniac and Live Nation, attract tens of thousands of participants annually.³ Even under the restrictions enforced during the COVID-19 pandemic, both Beyond Wonderland and Life is Beautiful sold out of presale tickets, and Hard Summer welcomed more than 160,000 attendees over two days, making festivals like these important sites of analysis for contemporary communication scholars.⁴ The rhetoric of music is complex, temporary, multisensory, and frequently nonverbal. The unique ethos performed by electronic dance music (EDM) communities represents modes of transgressing dominant and oppressive rhetorics that are unique to the festival experience and well suited for rhetorical analysis *in situ*.⁵

In this dissertation, I ask “How do music festivals function as temporary communities that rhetorically construct the performance of gender and sexuality?”⁶ I find that the intense bass common in EDM music uses a rhetorical strategy I call disorientation to invoke the persuasive characteristics of carnival. I support my contribution by describing multiple instances in which disorientation combines with other components of EDM to transgress the patriarchal, heteronormative, white supremacist, and capitalist expressions of gender and sexuality dominant outside of EDM festivals. By employing rhetorical criticism *in situ* in order to answer my primary research question, I develop an approach to rhetorical field methods I call Performative Participant Observation. I demonstrate this method in my own research process and recommend similar methods for scholars interested in studying ephemeral and public performances of gender and sexuality as well as the performances of each identity made possible by contemporary examples of carnivalesque festivities.

In order to investigate gender and sexuality in EDM, I attended three music festivals in the summer of 2021: Beyond Wonderland, Nocturnal Wonderland, and Hard Summer. After more than ninety hours of fieldwork and dozens of pages of rough notes turned into narrative recounting, I have arrived at two conclusions. First, participatory performance alongside communities can allow rhetorical scholars to access culturally specific but temporary rhetorics that otherwise would go undocumented in academic scholarship. Carnavalesque and live musical performances are two examples of communal but ephemeral rhetorical texts well suited for study *in situ*. Second, my performative and participatory approach to rhetorical field methods also allows researchers to take a polysemic and intersectional feminist perspective of rhetoric as it is produced, circulated, and lived. Accessing the performed rhetorics of carnival and rhetorically analyzing them contributes to a larger feminist project of evaluating communicative strategies for their capacity to enact feminist ideologies.

Carnival refers to a mode of social performance as well as a set of theoretical concepts for understanding said performance. Studies of the carnivalesque are generally traced to Mikhail Mikhaïlovich Bakhtin. Bakhtin contends that the ritual social traditions endemic to the carnivalesque festivities of Europe's Middle Ages enabled social performances of status as well as transgression of the status quo.⁷ Bakhtinian thinking inspires a larger interdisciplinary tradition of scholarship on the public sphere. Public sphere scholarship often traces back to Jürgen Habermas who argued that the public sphere is a place where citizens negotiate the rules for living in 'civil' society.⁸ He coined the situation in which the conditions for public discourse are met as an enactment of "the public sphere."

Habermas focused on Europe's bourgeoisie class, illustrating the ways that their fiscal privilege allowed them time to immerse themselves in discourse about the public issues of the time. 'Entering the tête-à-tête' was predicated on knowing the multiple voices that began contributing to the conversation before one arrived and responding to the ones that carried on hashing and rehashing social structures.⁹ In the tradition of the European salon, participation in public discourse allowed privileged individuals to co-mingle their thinking with that of the ruling class and to therefore effect social change. However, carrying on the polysemic conversations that Habermas argued characterized salon culture was predicated upon a participant's time and effort in studying current events and their sociohistorical contexts. The privilege of studying and contributing to the contemporary discourse of the public sphere was predicated upon multiple other privileges, notably those associated with class, gender and race. Habermas was conspicuously quiet on the latter two topics, as astute public sphere scholars point out and as I address within the context of my intersectional feminist approach to rhetorical criticism *in situ*.¹⁰

Mikhail Bakhtin's theorization of the carnivalesque illuminates tools that marginalized rhetors use to access and influence conversations within the public sphere. Bakhtin was

particularly interested in the medieval feudal systems that subordinated serfs to titled and landed lords within European aristocracies.¹¹ He argued that the socioeconomic relationships between lords and their tenants contributed to the unique character performances that simultaneously transgressed and upheld medieval socioeconomics within the performance of carnival.

The medieval carnival was a time of celebration funded and produced by the aristocracy. Carnival festivities were open to any hopeful participants from the public. Festivities would last for days at a time. Food, drink, and entertainment were provided by titled rulers, often on the grounds of their grand estates. Carnival represented one of the few times within the strict social structures of the European Middle Ages when the various classes interacted informally in close proximity with one another.¹² Working class individuals could laugh with, at, and even about the aristocracy in their presence, elevating themselves temporarily to the same social role. All these celebratory moments, supposedly manifested by the magnificent benevolence of aristocrats rather than working people's rents and taxes, helped the ruling class of the Middle Ages maintain a patriarchal narrative that granted them dominance over the working and poor classes. Nevertheless, Bakhtin showed how social norms could be transgressed, even just temporarily, by marginalized groups via carnivalesque performances.

Carnavalesque fantasy can be confused for myth or fairytale because it engages the imagination. Carnival encourages its participants to take on new roles and identities that might seem out of step with dominant ideologies. That does not, however, preclude the fantastic from being real for those who participate in it. Fantasy participants act out storylines; they interact with each other; they sweat and bleed and lose a day of their lives every dawn like the rest of us. None of this is escapable within fantasy. Bakhtin frequently cautioned his readers not to make light of carnivalesque because the performances were merry in tone and jesting in nature. He argued that the mass participant audiences did not just pretend to rework their social structures

during carnival. They lived in their reformulated community identities until the fantasy ended.¹³ Understood this way, a “fantastic” scene can be extraordinary, absurd, and/or grotesque.¹⁴ It is that which is considered too extreme or campy for common civil discourse. The contradiction between what is considered normal and what is considered fantastic exposes the possibility for social change. Participant performances of the fantastic show that transgressing dominant social norms is not only thinkable, but also doable.

Scholars from multiple disciplines have joined public sphere scholarship with Bakhtinian analysis of conditions that make public discourse possible. Bakhtin’s influence appears in scholarly treatments of the role of celebration, merriment, and the extraordinary conditions that make critical inquiry into public discourse possible. Bakhtin recognized that there were particular class-based requirements for the performance of carnival. His revelations about the power of the performance of norms that are out of the ordinary were guided by the feudal society of the Middle Ages. However, they largely ignore the raced, gendered, and classed requirements that barred most from public discourse. Scholars transformed public sphere scholarship by expanding the examination of the relationship between class and political discourse beyond the realm of white, patriarchal privilege. My own analysis in this dissertation is informed by intersectional feminist theory, which recognizes the ways in which power and privilege are impacted by how individuals are situated within systems and structures, specifically considering the salience of race, class, gender, and the like.¹⁵

Though not originally developed to address issues of gender, multiple scholars have used Bakhtin’s key concepts to examine communication about gender. For example, Stephen Brown, Lorna Stevens, and Pauline Maclaran use Bakhtin’s interpretations of “chronotype, carnivalesque, and heteroglossia” to investigate gendered representations in advertisements.”¹⁶ They adapt Bakhtin’s assertions that time and space are bound to one another (chronotype); that

knowledge is always multiple, contested and incomplete (heteroglossia); and that medieval fairs created extraordinary circumstances where social norms could be temporarily transgressed (carnavalesque). They contend that these three concepts allow feminist critics a unique vantage into the gendered politics of advertising. Erin Reser is similarly interested in Bakhtinian language for its ability to describe the gendered politics that distinguish vernacular from dominant discourse. Reser contends that the carnivalesque tradition of making a spectacle of the male body has a feminizing function.¹⁷ For Reser, the feminization of the male body, especially the fiscally poor male body, ultimately reinforces a discursive connection between masculinity and economic success. Reser argues that dominant and vernacular discourses can work together, issuing a warning about uncritically accepting the carnivalesque and the transgressive as inherently liberatory. Finally, Julia Menard-Warwick taps into Bakhtin's definition of dialogue. Bakhtin describe dialogue as "dual-toned" speech "of the forces and phenomena of different times, of two poles of becoming of the beginning and the end of a metamorphosis."¹⁸ The dialogue Bakhtin examines typically occurred between two literary characters whose perspectives were relatively balanced and equally honored in literature. Mernard-Warwick uses the term to describe the dualistic relationship between the "good woman" character her interviewee demonstrates and the space she maintains for other women to perform differently.¹⁹

Scholars who use Bakhtin's concepts to examine communication about gender generally agree that carnivalesque experiences enable public performances of gender transgression. They also balance their optimism with cautions that the temporal, contextual, and heteroglossic characteristics of the carnival can limit the impact of carnivalesque performances of gender in broader society. I take up their focus by asking what rhetorical strategies performed within contemporary iterations of carnivalesque in EDM festivals further enable transgressions of gender. I also heed their cautions when analyzing the larger socio-historical contexts that relegate

the influence of grotesque merriment into the festival experience. In addition to assessing the gendered dimensions of festival rhetorics, I also analyze queer sexuality in carnivalesque performances.

Bakhtin emphasized the bodily rhetorics of carnival.²⁰ He recognized the importance of what he called “the lower stratum,” in carnival²¹. By this, he meant that defecation, sexual intercourse, and other general leakage from the body’s lower orifices were permissible topics of public performance and conversation during carnivalesque festivities in the Middle Ages. In these writings, Bakhtin demonstrates a general openness to the ideas of persuasion in sexuality. He describes a festive experience wherein new approaches to gendered and sexual expression are possible, explaining “We must here stress that it was in the material acts and eliminations of the body—eating, drinking, defecation, sexual life—that man found and retraced within himself the earth, sea, air, fire, and all the cosmic matter and its manifestations, and was thus able to assimilate them.”²² In other words, the banal acts associated with the human body, especially sex, brought all participants in the carnival to the same social plane, where they were materially equal. Despite Bakhtin’s nods to the radical potential of sexuality, he largely adapts a heteronormative interpretation of it, a pattern that public sphere scholars have productively disrupted while maintaining Bakhtin’s thesis that the rhetoric of carnival and performance of festivity can create situations when “for a short time life came out of its usual, legalized and consecrated furrows and entered the sphere of utopian freedom.”²³

For instance, Mernard-Warwick finds that her interviewee created a multi-voiced narrative regarding her sister’s pregnancy and unmarried status.²⁴ That narrative balanced voices that criticized her sister for disrupting heteronormative expectations of sexual reproduction with one’s that supported her and maintained her humanity despite her reproducing out of heterosexual wedlock. Additionally, Paul Booth contends that slash films (highly sexualized and

gory fan factions of popular television and film) and pomedies (parodies of heterosexual porn) are both examples of carnivalesque enactments of sexuality.²⁵ Booth argues that slash has more transgressive potential than pomedies, which he argues “hyper-articulates” patriarchal heteronormativity.²⁶ Lastly, James Janack applies Bakhtin’s thinking about the spectacle of the male body in carnivalesque to Jesse Ventura’s persona in his run for and time as Minnesota’s governor.²⁷ Janack argues that images of Ventura’s inflated muscles and stories about his (mis)adventures in masculinity cemented his role as an outsider in politics. Ventura’s campy masculinity gave him access to the role of a carnivalesque jester whose dual performance mirrors the dominant politics of male sexuality while also mocking hypermasculine performances of sexuality.

Scholars interested in the relationship between carnivalesque and sexuality recognize the dominance of heteronormative discourses while interrogating the ways that these discourses become normalized and others become queer.²⁸ Mernard-Warnack, Booth, and Janack each point out that the extraordinary conditions created by carnivalesque performance can make room for queer performances of sexuality including non-heteronormative reproduction, slash sexuality, and satirical hypermasculinity. Janack pragmatically asks whether the carnivalesque is therefore a tool of oppression or social justice. He responds to himself, that even though he feels confident in saying the carnivalesque can enable liberatory character performances in the public sphere, the opposite is just as likely to be true.²⁹ My dissertation is similarly and purposefully concerned with carnivalesque possibilities for enacting queer performances of sexuality within communities. I add to Mernard-Warnack, Booth, and Janack’s work by examining a new community in the form of EDM audiences. My dissertation looks for new strategies of queer liberation in new rhetorical locations. I maintain that carnival is a useful analytic framework for

identifying potentially queer performances of sexuality, while I recognize Bakhtin's theories contain inherent shortcomings related to their ability to consider sexuality *and* race.

The utopian freedom Bakhtin imagined within carnival has always been predicated on participants ability to meet the raced expectations of each social performance. However, Bakhtin neglects to engage race as an analytic factor in his literary criticism. This might be due in part to the relatively homogenous European cultures he focused on or his own immersion in the politics of Russian Nationalism.³⁰ Bakhtin's optimism for carnivalesque's ability to foster social progress are couched in evidence of carnival principles of inversions, parodies, and mockeries working in favor of white supremacy. For instance, Polly Bugros Mclean and David Wallace demonstrate how blogging allowed white agitators to make a carnivalesque spectacle of a white candidate running for political office in a predominantly Black district.³¹ They illustrate a foreboding picture of white rhetors using carnival inversion in favor of white supremacist ideologies. On the other hand, scholars have also found carnivalesque communication can involve dominant and marginalized ideologies at the same time. Euni Kim argues that stand-up comedy about identity politics, particularly race, enacts polysemic messages about marginalized races and ethnicities that appear funny to dominant audiences and embrace "in group" stereotypes that reinforce agency and connectedness within marginalized communities.³²

The whiteness written into original conceptions of the carnivalesque creates dangerous omissions in strict Bakhtinian analysis. Communication scholars conscious of the unequal distribution of social power in Europe and the United States have identified carnivalesque performances that exclude or even attack people of color³³. I incorporate these insights into my dissertation by looking expressly for the presence of white supremacy within EDM festivities. In its absence, I consider what aspects of the carnivalesque have helped racism to fade temporarily

in the festival context. I do so out of a commitment to enacting an intersectional feminist approach to my rhetorical criticism of the carnivalesque in EDM communities.

Communication scholars conduct intersectional Bakhtinian analysis by asking about the various aspects of identity that are simultaneously affirmed and denied within the realm of the carnival.³⁴ Existing in this state of simultaneity reflects a key concept in analysis of the carnival, liminality. Liminality is an existence that is always arriving, forever incomplete, and constantly made and remade in the changing world that carnival makes imaginable.³⁵ Within this scholarly cohort, some argue that the rhetorical possibilities inscribed in liminal experiences represent moments when the social status quo can be rethought within ideologically oppressive contexts.³⁶ Therefore, liminality enables individuals to move between fixed and reimagined identities and thus between character role and status within their communities. As such, it is an important part of what makes carnival an applicable tool for contemporary social change and the theoretical framework for its study. In other words, liminality contributes to the rhetorical messages performed in carnival festivities.

My dissertation adds to research on the carnivalesque by asking how modern music festivals and EDM can enact carnivalesque experiences via liminality. In addition to introducing a unique set of case studies as my rhetorical text for analysis, I extend the Bakhtinian tradition by joining the cadre of scholars complicating his and other theories of the public sphere with critical attention to the concepts of gender, sexuality, and race. My analysis adds the concept of disorientation to the list of strategies available to engage carnivalesque performances. Lastly, I combine carnivalesque criticism with intersectional rhetorical criticism to compliment scholars like Anderton who diligently examine the reach of producers and artists in shaping the rhetoric of festivals. I take a polysemic approach to my rhetorical criticism that recognizes the agency of audiences in conjunction with that of festival planners and artist-performers.

Creating fantastic rhetorics is an enormous undertaking which, in the contemporary era, requires capital, infrastructure, creative talent, and huge employee rosters. In the EDM industry, these rosters are often gatekept by producers and various dance music industry executives. I regard industry executives who organize and fund festivals as carnival producers. This isn't to say that these privileged members of social communities are the only parties responsible for creating the rhetoric of festivals, but there is significant persuasive potential in developing setlists, infrastructure, advertising, and other elements of the festival that must necessarily be planned before attendees can participate in them. In medieval contexts, lords and their households and staff were the primary producers of carnival. In the radically countercultural festivals of the 1960s, famous festival planners included the likes of Michael Lang of Woodstock, and the Rolling Stones of the Altamont Free Concert.³⁷ Today, producers of carnival festivities in EDM contexts include industry executives, talent acquisition teams, hospitality managers, and dozens of other organizers all subsumed under two dominant corporate structures.³⁸ Bakhtin points out that lords had a great deal invested in producing carnivalesque performances for their tenants. Allowing temporary moments of social transgression, Bakhtin argues, was a crucial component of *maintaining* social hierarchies in the Middle Ages.³⁹ He contends that sponsoring festivities contributed to an image of aristocracy as benevolent leaders. The level of intellect and agency of music festival audiences is debated amongst scholars.⁴⁰ However, the rhetorical strategies of carnival are promising but limited for permanently rewriting the social order. They exist in a liminal space, somewhere between radical discursive potential and apathy towards the injustices of the contemporary world.

Carnival performances also feature paid performances by professional artists. Medieval carnival featured live music, theatre, and games facilitated by professional performers.⁴¹ These performers were usually employed by and thusly aligned with producers. Hired entertainers

underscored the festive nature of carnival, reinforcing the rightful empowerment of a select few aristocrats to rule over impoverished masses. Today, EDM industry executives delegate the task of talent acquisition to trusted colleagues and some even play the dual role of production company CEO and musical performance artist.⁴² However, even though industry leaders have gatekeeping powers when it comes to festival production, and artist performers have a literally elevated stage on the EDM scene, neither party, alone or in tandem, can complete the rhetorical experience of an EDM festival. Audience participants are also featured performers in the festival experiences.

Participant performance has been and continues to be a core characteristic of carnivalesque festivities. The earliest discussions of carnival recognized the power of working-class performers in carnivalesque rituals. They were feature participants in carnival parades. They played critical roles like that of the Jester or the festival King.⁴³ The entire festival experience was designed around creating a good time for working-class tenants that sustained the feudal system. Woodstock didn't earn a place in rock and roll infamy because the rock star lineup performed according to plans and expectation. The landmark music festival was a famous logistical nightmare, and audience members' commitment to participating forced producers to abandon plans to ticket participants.⁴⁴ In the twenty-first century, participant performers write themselves into the narrative of EDM festivals by creating hyper individual identity performances and practicing the traditions associated with "Peace, Love, Unity, and Respect," the raver ethos known as PLUR. In short, academic research on the carnival shows that participatory performance by large audiences plays a significant role in developing carnivalesque discourse.

I planned my dissertation around these opportunities for extending the study of carnival with an intersectional feminist approach to rhetorical field methods that foregrounds the role of

audience in rhetorical production while also recognizing how audiences co-create carnivalesque rhetorics with producers and audience performers. I build my argument about the possibilities and limitations of carnivalesque performances to transgress dominant ideologies about gender and sexuality. I look for evidence of such possibilities and limitations in three EDM festivals that took place in the summer of 2021.

During the summer of 2021, I attended three music festivals held annually in San Bernardino, California: Beyond Wonderland, Nocturnal Wonderland, and Hard Summer. Each appeal to EDM communities (also known as rave communities/ravers), and therefore have overlapping characteristics like audiences, performers, and locations. Each festival is also distinct from the others in ways that are instructive for my research. For instance, even though Beyond Wonderland and Nocturnal Wonderland are run by the same production company, Insomniac, they engage distinct themes that use unique rhetorical devices to create two different fantastical universes for festival goers. Hard Summer, produced by Live Nation, the largest entertainment conglomerate in the world, depends less on theatrics and engages a “summer music festival” premise that creates different expectations for the ways that participants will perform their gender and sexuality. In the following sections, I explain the festivals in more detail and clarify how each event provides an important opportunity for studying the rhetorical construction of gender and sexuality amid musical communities.

Beyond Wonderland is an annual two-day dance and EDM festival staged at the National Orange Show (NOS) Events Center in San Bernardino, California, that took place on August 27th and 28th, 2021.⁴⁵ Approximately 40,000 people were in attendance, the demographics of which are discussed below. Beyond Wonderland is themed around *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, and participants are encouraged to perform reimaginations of the characters in Lewis Carroll's infamous fantasy novel as they move throughout the festival grounds.⁴⁶ Grounds included stages

designed to mimic critical locations in *Alice in Wonderland*, like The Mad Hatter's Castle or The Caterpillar's Woods. Insomniac encourages participants to embody the many character roles in the novel and use the festival's spatial and theatrical staging to play with potential identities as they experience music and art. They explain, "when day breaks in Wonderland, a curious cast of characters emerges, and fantastical animals of all shapes and sizes run wild."⁴⁷

Nocturnal Wonderland occupied several acres in Glen Helen Regional Park in the San Bernardino Mountains on September 18th and 19th 2021 after being postponed due to public health concerns.⁴⁸ It boasted 50,000 attendees. Promoters style the festival around a nocturnal thematic to appeal to an audience of "headliners" interested in "seeking the unknown" together. Insomniac incites participants to "enter a world of sights and sounds as vibrant and unique as those who have come, year after year, to behold its *fantastical* mysteries," (emphasis added) where "curious creatures of all shapes and sizes move to the vibrations of the night."⁴⁹ They imply that nocturnal activities contribute to EDM community members' ability to experience togetherness through music. Insomniac takes great pains to underscore the connectedness of participants in Nocturnal Wonderland, claiming "in this place, we affirm that we are kindred spirits bound by deep passion—not only for the music we love, but for the community that surrounds it. That community is why we are here."⁵⁰

The largest festival in this study, Hard Summer, was staged at the NOS Events Center on July 31st and August 1st of 2021.⁵¹ It drew 100,000 participants. Live Nation describes their festival as an experience "where you'll hear the most buzzing artists in electronic music and hip-hop."⁵² These markers are particularly broad, as are the musical lineup and festival theme.⁵³ True to Live Nation's description, headliners include hip-hop stars like Future and 2 Chainz as well as EDM DJs like Rezz and DJ Snake.⁵⁴ The festival's website offers little description of the event's theme, but photo galleries of past events feature young people in swimwear playing in pools and

other water features when they are not riding Ferris-wheels or watching concerts by popular hip hop and dance artists.⁵⁵

Corporate sponsors seldom disclose socio-cultural demographics of attendees at these festivals, but my observations suggest that they mimic the socio-demographics of the locations where they take place. Notable exceptions exist in globally famous festivals like Electric Daisy Carnival, or EDC which draws participants from around the globe. An important dynamic of the demographics of music festivals, however, is the potential they have for allowing participants to revise identities and reimagine community dynamics. So, the demographic characteristics assigned to ravers outside the festival may or may not match their performances of identity within.

Beyond Wonderland, Nocturnal Wonderland, and Hard Summer are multi-day festivals that feature dozens of musical acts. The themes of each festival create certain expectations about the sorts of roles that women and LGBTQ+ individuals can play during these events. Beyond Wonderland and Nocturnal Wonderland advertise boundary-pushing fantasy universes where music makes the critical reimagining of gender and sexuality possible. Live Nation markets Hard Summer as a spring break style celebration. As such, participants' performances of sexuality and gender can speak to modern music festivals' resemblance to spring breaks of the past. My observation of festival provides details about contemporary festival communities and their engagement with or transformation of the patriarchal and heteronormative summer music festivals of the 1990s and early 2000s. Therefore, I operationalize participant observations as a rhetorical field method for experiencing the gendered and sexual rhetorics that operate *in situ* in musical festival communities.

Rhetorical Field Methods (RFM) were developed in response to multiple calls for communication studies scholars to engage rhetoric *in situ* or on-site. Dwight Conquergood

explained that fieldwork could give rhetorical scholars insight into the dynamic experience of everyday rhetoric.⁵⁶ He claimed that the participatory tools developed for ethnographic fieldwork could help scholars build arguments grounded in the cultural, performative, and material rhetorics of the everyday. Greg Dickinson, Carole Blair, and Brian Ott responded to Conquergood's call in their volume examining diverse "places of public memory," an early and influential contribution to rhetorical field methods.⁵⁷ RFM scholars go to the places of rhetorical production and circulation because they believe that rhetorical experiences are deeply embodied and emplaced. RFM is a unique approach to rhetorical studies that employs participatory methods of textual construction that inform criticism and theory building.⁵⁸ For instance, Michael Middleton, Aaron Hess, Danielle Endres, and Samantha Senda-Cook traced their inspirations for the first book-length project on RFM to ethnographic, performance, and critical rhetorical studies.⁵⁹ Each author reflects on narrative vignettes that they developed over several months in "the field." They define "the field" as (1) *a place and research*, (2) *a community of meaning*, (3) *a context*, and (4) *a rhetorical actor*.⁶⁰ Aaron Hess's field was at once a collection of raves, a community of ravers, a context of celebration and partying, and a rhetorical agent in the production and circulation of anti-drug rhetoric. Hess's research demonstrates the applicability of RFM for studying rhetoric in and around live music. His and his co-authors' construction of narrative vignettes from their fieldnotes also illustrates the most outstanding innovation of the RFM scholar, the consideration of ephemeral "fields" as disappearing rhetorical archives critics access to understand texts, especially texts produced by rhetors whose words often go unrecorded.

Each of the major projects on RFM to follow Middleton et al. took up the question, "what is the field?" For instance, Sara McKinnon, Robert Asen, Karma Chávez, and Robert Glenn Howard define the field as "the nexus where rhetoric is produced, where it is enacted, where it

circulates, and consequently, where it is audienceed."⁶¹ Candice Rai and Caroline Gottschalk Druschke's definition of the field is worth quoting at length. They state:

Field sites are simultaneously locations for inquiry; socially inflected ecologies from which rhetoric emerges, circulates, and performs its work; places (as well as metaphors/synecdoche/heuristics for places) in which rhetoric comes to life, entangled with meaning and forces; amalgamations of people, things, materialities, exigencies, public memories, collective dreams, myths, events, macrolevel influences and microlevel energetics that manifest as singularities in place and time; and representations of the places of persuasion that engage in the earnest (if also impossible) labors of bearing witness to the complexities of a place.⁶²

Each of these definitions of "the field" recognizes the inimitability of live rhetorical experiences and encourages researchers to engage participatory methods to record and understand the messages that emerge from within them.

In RFM, scholars access rhetorical messages available within "the field" through embodiment and emplacement. For example, Candice Rai and Caroline Gottschalk Druschke argue that bringing the critic's body into "the dynamic, living, breathing ecologies that give rise to rhetoric and its work enhances the capacity to understand and observe rhetoric as a three-dimensional situated force."⁶³ Jamie Landau suggests that analyzing rhetoric through embodiment allows critics to access affective experiences. Landau explains that affective experiences are physiological, social, and pre-semiotic responses to communication that allow RFM scholars to become "feeling rhetorical critics."⁶⁴ She explains, "*By feeling rhetorical critics*, I argue that we can more fully embody the politics of criticism, expand the object of analysis beyond traditional symbolic texts, and take seriously the possibility of another

participant in rhetoric."⁶⁵ Middleton et al. interpret embodiment much like Dwight Conquergood did, as a way of accessing a *place* of knowing.⁶⁶

Examples of RFM scholars employing participant observation to study gendering rhetorics are compelling. Phaedra Pezzullo, for example, studies feminist and environmentalist rhetoric by riding along with the Toxic Links Coalition on their bus tour of California's bay area.⁶⁷ Karma Chávez studies the rhetoric of migration and queer politics through activism in each community.⁶⁸ Her criticisms, built on intersectional feminist theory, show how participation can activate embodiment and emplacement to blur the line between criticism and activism while maintaining a minimum risk to research participants. Each author made significant methodological and theoretical contributions to social movement studies and intersectional rhetorical theory. Regardless, there is ample room to add to these foundational works in RFM to accomplish the core objectives of intersectional feminist rhetorical studies.

Feminist rhetorical criticism informed by intersectionality reflects the pursuit of gender justice. Dow and Condit explain that feminist research is not equivalent to gender studies.⁶⁹ They argue that feminist rhetorical studies are an inherently critical endeavor that is political in aim. Feminist rhetoricians combat the mystification of patriarchal communication, identify problematic discourses, describe and recommend progressive ones, and combat long histories of gendered oppression and violence.

RFM can help critics work for gender justice by reconceptualizing the role of the critic. Middleton et al. contend that embodied research allows critics to assume various identities, including *advocate, observer, participant, witness, opponent, and companion*.⁷⁰ They emphasize that the shifting identities of researchers do not stagnate after a rhetorician leaves "the field," underscoring participatory methods' ability to promote direct advocacy as well as advocacy within academic work. For instance, as an advocate, a researcher might help hold a protest line

while conducting an observation. When they write their analysis, they could reflect on the physical requirements of embodied protest and stimulate conversations about ableism within feminist movements in academic journals and college classrooms. Similarly, as a witness, a critic might use their co-presence with a community to communicate to adversaries that they are being seen. Later on, the same critic could write about the role of witnessing for white allies. In any case, embodiment allows the researcher to move between identities pragmatically to work for gender justice at several stages in the research process.

A second goal of rhetorical critics doing intersectional feminist work is to trace the roots of oppression to their different intersections. Carrie Crenshaw asks rhetoricians to "trace the intersections of these differences" to "the diverse experiences of all women."⁷¹ This sort of analysis requires scholars to remain ready and willing to "ask the other question" or explore the multiple layers of identity that continuously compound the experience of gender.⁷² Thinking of intersectionality in this way decenters "add and stir" approaches to criticism and requires prolonged engagement with communities to understand the specific socio-historical and contemporary rhetorics that influence group identity.⁷³ RFM forcefully supports the use of archival and historical research of communities before entering "the field."⁷⁴ Rhetorical scholars that practice field methods add that entering "the field" is an apt way of accessing the physical and cultural ecologies that produce rhetoric.⁷⁵

Thinking of "the field" as ecology recognizes the agency of the field itself. It also acknowledges the organic transformations that every field is constantly undergoing. As a physical ecology, rhetorical fields are constantly undergoing natural processes of chemical and mechanical transformations. They are also frequently manipulated for their rhetorical potential by humans and other animals. According to Middleton et al., the field as a physical location can be a place of research and a rhetorical agent simultaneously. Scholars interested in the material

rhetoric of "the field" investigate the rhetoricity of material and ecological components of research sites. To illustrate, Kenneth S. Zagacki and Victoria J. Gallagher ask how landscape mixes with monuments to create environmental arguments. Dickinson, Ott, and Aoki explain how built environments can emphasize a socially constructed spatial aesthetic like the old west.⁷⁶ Caroline Gottschalk Druschke argues that public infrastructure like watersheds could communicate a "commonplace" shared between disparate communities.⁷⁷ In sum, RFM provides scholars opportunities to trace identity to the places where it is constructed and to study amongst those who construct it.

RFM also allows intersectional critics to experience rhetoric as it builds identity in specific community contexts. The participatory nature of RFM gives scholars access to the often unseen work of social transformation. Since its inception, RFM has been particularly interested in the study of underrepresented communities. Conquergood was one of the first to emphasize the utility of community engagement as a form of rhetorical research.⁷⁸ He conducted some of the earliest fieldwork considered RFM and used his research platform to address marginalization and social inequality.⁷⁹ Living amongst Hmong refugees and Chicago street gang communities throughout his career enabled him to make poignant arguments about the rhetorical performance of identity. It also informed his engagement with those communities. Conquergood used his time in the field to interrogate the raced, classed, and gendered politics of policing in Chicago's communities of color and frame gangs as a community response to security structures that deny folk protection based on the intersections of their identities. Later, Karma Chávez argued that participatory methods are necessary to study underrepresented social movement groups because these groups often do much of the work of organizing in "enclaves," or protected spaces void of the gaze of broader publics.⁸⁰ Joshua P. Ewalt, Jessy J. Ohl, and Damien Smith Pfister investigate the interplay between online planning, protesting, and performing activism by

participating in Occupy Wall Street protests, performatively reimagining those protests, and then considering the unique rhetorical challenges of a leaderless movement for wealth equality.⁸¹ RFM scholars study underrepresented populations in embodied and emplaced participation to "feel," as Landau puts it, the roots of identity.⁸² Tracing power to the intersections of identity is a constant and always incomplete task, as the ecology of a community is ever-evolving. RFM offers a partial view into a fleeting moment of rhetorical evolution within communities to enable scholars to understand how gender, sexuality, race, class, ability, and other strands of identity function together in a particular moment to manifest powerful performances that maintain, transform, and challenge community dynamics.

Participating with communities is one way of accomplishing a goal set out by feminist rhetorical critics and summarized by Sarah Ahmed, to keep criticism "close to the skin."⁸³ Ahmed's metaphor reminds readers that rhetorical theory is not a simple abstraction of speech disconnected from human experience. Instead, theory building, especially feminist theory building, is best when grounded in the real-life experiences of those whom the theory purports to be about. Women's studies scholars and feminist rhetoricians also refer to this type of scholarship as "theories in the flesh."⁸⁴ RFM supports theorizing in the flesh by emphasizing embodiment as a method of analysis. RFM critics use their bodies to more fully understand the embodied experience of others, meaning that they experience rhetoric through their bodies, through their flesh and skin before any other mediation.

Middleton et al., McKinnon et al., Rai and Gottschalk Druschke, and Samantha Senda-Cook et al. call scholars to activate their bodies as a critical research tool.⁸⁵ They agree that the critic's body can access rhetorical messages that are emotional, quotidian, and ephemeral in a way that is difficult with pre-recorded materials. In McKinnon et al.'s collection of readings on FRM, Jamie Landau suggests that analyzing rhetoric through embodiment allows critics to

access affective experiences.⁸⁶ Aaron Hess contends that this sort of affective engagement can be achieved through a "phronetic orientation," wherein "critics take part in discourse and learn specific strategies and praxes for advocacy."⁸⁷ Kathleen de Onís steers conversations about bodies back to co-presence and clarifies that even though co-presence is not necessarily sufficient for understanding intimate cultural rhetorics, embodiment does open doors for researchers.⁸⁸ Candice Rai and Caroline Gottschalk Druschke argue that bringing the critic's body into "the dynamic, living, breathing ecologies that give rise to rhetoric and its work enhances the capacity to understand and observe rhetoric as a three-dimensional situated force."⁸⁹ Finally, by including Phaedra Pezzulo's study of the toxic links coalition and their environmentally motivated protests against corporate polluters, Senda-Cook et al. demonstrate the importance of placing the body in places of protest to access essential discourses in marginalized communities.⁹⁰ In each example, the rhetorical critic's body engages with texts that live and breathe *as* they are doing so. Embodied research and judgment recognize audience members as rhetorical agents and engages with them to understand their contributions to rhetorical experiences. RFM scholarship shows that embodiment gives perspectives on experiences that are rhetorical, situated, contingent, ephemeral, emplaced, and powerful characteristics of the everyday. In other words, RFM gives scholars access to rhetorics "close to the skin," like those that circulate at modern music festivals.

To clarify my use of participant observation as a rhetorical field method of textual construction, I now walk through the chronological processes of preparing for and attending a music festival.⁹¹ Participant observation of a music festival requires logistic preparation before the event, *in situ* participation and fieldnote documentation, and continuous preliminary analysis of fieldnotes before, during, and after each festival. To begin, a hopeful festival participant must obtain festival tickets.

Purchasing tickets is the first step in preparing for a music festival. EDM festivals generally have high ticket prices and sell out quickly. Hard Summer, for instance, offered packages starting at \$189 for both days and up to \$359 for VIP tickets.⁹² I purchased tickets for all three festivals for roughly \$200 a piece after taxes and service fees. The tickets I purchased for Beyond Wonderland and Nocturnal Wonderland were both purchased on certified resale sites for an upcharge since presale tickets were sold out by the time I had IRB approval and more general admission tickets were guaranteed to be released (they eventually were). The difficulty and expense related to purchasing festival tickets reveals the dedication and investment that participation in EDM events requires from community members, and the preparation doesn't end there. Before each festival, including Hard Summer, I had to plan and pack appropriate attire, recording materials, and basic care and hygiene products.

Packing clothing for the festival was a critical step in assuming my role as a *participant* researcher. Packing properly required a careful balance of planning for 100+ degree days and the cultural expectations around attire established by the "summer music festival" theme. It also required careful consideration of how to reflect my identity as a researcher among audiences who are more familiar with EDM culture than myself. Beyond attire, I also had to pack appropriate recording devices to collect fieldnotes. During festival hours (Hard Summer ran July 31st and August 1st from 2:00 pm to 12:00 am), I took notes on the "notes" application on my cellphone. I brought along portable phone chargers and small notebooks to Beyond Wonderland before realizing I could easily charge my phone to last long after festival hours and that taking notes by hand was both conspicuous and impractical. Finally, I had to bring basic care and hygiene products that will allow me to conduct my fieldwork safely. Like many other festivals, Hard Summer does not allow re-entry to participants who leave before the event ends. Therefore, participants and participant researchers must prepare basic care and hygiene products for optimal

comfort throughout the day. Necessary items include refillable water bottles, sunscreen, sunglasses, and money for food, as outside food and drink are not allowed at most events.

The second and most crucial step in my textual construction process is *in situ* participation in music festivals. Community performances of gender and sexuality can begin as soon as participants dawn their attire for the day. Many festival-goers plan their outfits together. They trade “Kandi” (small, handmade beaded bracelets) and get ideas for decorating their “totem poles” (this slang is appropriated from Native American cultures, but is used in EDM communities to mean tall decorated poles that help groups find one another in crowds), on public forums.⁹³ However, I began taking fieldnotes at the festival gates. At entrances, attendees interact with one another as a temporary community for the first time. For instance, participants may use the entry spaces in ways that reflect divisions between persons based on their gendered bodies. Security might emphasize the role of consent during physical searches and underscore a rhetoric of sexual choice as fans enter the festival grounds. After entering the gates, attendees like myself often explore festival grounds, walking down makeshift malls to get a sense of the location of different stands selling merchandise, food, and drink, as well as each stage and what sorts of acts will appear there. During these moments, I began noting the different aspects of sexual and gendered performances. For instance, I take note of the movement of festival attendees into and back out of festival spaces, emphasizing moments when festival infrastructure, attendees, and performers manifest moments where traditional performances of gender and sexuality are either reimaged or reaffirmed.

Live music performances are the primary events where I participate, observe, and collect fieldnotes on community performances of sex and gender at festivals. Not only are live music performances the impetus for the festivals, but they also bring together the most diverse cross-section of festival communities and create extraordinary circumstances for performing identity.

Live music performances bring artists, organizers, and fans together as a community where each participant plays a role in constructing sexual and gendered expectations. To explain, at Hard Summer, artists contribute to the construction of gendered and sexual politics when they design their setlists, choosing to perform songs that promote misogyny or question patriarchy. Festival organizers contract with third party employers who in turn provide the staff that make the wheels of festivals turn. For instance, sound and tech crews hang speakers and lights that emphasize particular musical messages and background others. Security protects certain bodies. Security polices certain bodies differently based on their performance of identity. Fans dance, sing, chant, crowd surf, push and shove one another, and engage intimacy with friends and strangers to varying degrees. Each community member I have named plays a specific role in rhetorically performing the politics of music festivals. They are co-participants in the construction of festival communities' rhetorics of gender and sexuality. During musical performances, festival participants become communities whose rhetorical potential is greater than the sum of its parts. Engaging with these communities as a participant-observer and creating fieldnotes that document performances of gender and sexuality provided the evidence that I use to construct an intersectional feminist rhetorical analysis of the musical rhetoric of EDM festivals.

After participating in festival activities and collecting fieldnotes throughout the day, I usually returned to my hotel and attempted to get some rest before either another day of observation or beginning the long journey from San Bernardino, California to Fort Collins, Colorado. During this time, I reflected on the rhetorical performances I witnessed and participated in. I continued taking raw-abbreviated fieldnotes into the night and until I arrived home in Colorado after each festival. Upon arriving home, and in most cases within 72 hours of my return, I constructed a chronological narrative account of my experiences at the festival aided by my scratch notes. I then reviewed my fieldnotes and narrative reflections for rhetorical themes

and strategies that emerged related to the performance of sexuality and gender. As themes and strategies appeared, I narrowed the focus of my analysis around intersectional feminist arguments about rhetorical infrastructure, character development, and musical vibrations. I show how these strategies can create a fantastic rhetoric capable of manifesting disorientation that can challenge status quo discourses about gender and sexuality.

I have designed my use of RFM and participant observation to inform a dissertation that recognizes intersectional feminist commitments to doing research. I have proposed a mode of textual construction that builds theory from evidence that reflects lived experiences. I have constructed a project intended to make critical contributions to feminist rhetorical criticism by exploring the understudied *in situ* performance of sexuality and gender in festival communities. Finally, I have developed steps for tracing the intersectional experiences of gender and sexuality to their embodied and emplaced locations, i.e., the rhetorical field manifested by music festivals. Overall, my first "Hard Summer" of fieldwork was more wondrous than nocturnal. It was also anything but simple. The same can be said of intersectional feminist rhetorical criticism. I endeavor to take on both approaches because I believe the former supports the latter, and the latter summarizes my academic mission in four precise words—intersectional feminist rhetorical criticism.

In this dissertation project, I build from scholarly research about the production, artistry, and participant performance of carnival. I take inspiration from Bakhtinian analysis but build my observations from the perspective of audiences. Adding these perspectives to cultural knowledges about musical festival and EDM industries and artists allows me to embody a polysemic and intersectional feminist approach to studying ephemeral rhetorics like musical expression.

In chapter two, I review experiences I had as a participant performer during the three music festivals I attended in the Summer of 2021. I use these experiences as evidence of the dominance of PLUR within rave communities. I illustrate the ways that raving infrastructure pulls ravers from their everyday lives, through liminal spaces, and into rhetorically dense locations within the fantasy which they co-create with artists and dance music industries. I contend that the force of disorientation, a state of mind induced by an overwhelming rhetorical milieu, is so great that it is capable of aiding participants in transgressing dominant interpretations of gender and sexuality that they bring with them from the world outside the rave, i.e.. the outside world. I document the transgression of gender and sexuality in stories about hypersexuality, consent, and maternity. Encouraging as these moments were, the carnivalesque rhetoric of EDM festivals cannot exist in a socio-historical vacuum. Resultingly, white supremacy, heteronormativity, capitalism, and patriarchy leak into the festival experience, limiting the potential of EDM as an intersectional feminist discourse.

In my penultimate argument, I examine the limitations of the EDM for generating intersectional feminist discourse. I show that EDM corporate structures model white supremacist hierarchies. I then propose potential relationships between the white supremacy, environmental injustice, and labor exploitation visible in the festival experience. Even though PLUR is an avidly pro LGBTQ+ ethos, I show that heteronormative discourse from the outside world regularly infiltrates festivals. Finally, I lament the apathy about capitalist injustice among ravers. I argue that the intersectional feminist possibilities for performing gender and sexuality within EDM communities is ultimately limited by racist, homophobic, capitalist, and patriarchal discourses that generate in the outside world and permeate even the most radical social fantasies.

In my conclusions, I shift my focus from analytic criticism to consider the implications of performed participant observation. I reason that performing the role of a participant allows me to

be witness to temporary but impactful rhetorical moments that are otherwise resistant to documentation and consequent analysis. I coin my methodological approach to rhetorical criticism Performative Participant Observation. I outline performative participant observation as a rhetorical field method. In my method, a critic takes on an assumed identity relevant to the communities they study and performs alongside others as a peer in the production of public discourse. The performances that scholars take part in become the texts that they then submit to rhetorical analysis guided by relevant communication theories. I then reflect on some of the challenges, surprises, and limitations of my dissertation project before concluding my project by reflecting on performative participant observation

CHAPTER TWO
SETTING THE STAGE FOR CARNIVAL:
LIMINALITY, DISORIENTATION, AND NEW PERFORMANCES OF GENDER AND
SEXUALITY

“A good researcher plays along,” I would tell myself to calm the nervousness I felt at the thought of appearing in public in neon fishnet stockings. Before I could pull the plug on all my dissertation plans, a fully grown adult skipped past in a bright pink tutu. They waved a wand over my head before disappearing into the crowd. I am one of those academics who has always felt a bit out of step with the people around me. I don’t think I could have stood out there if I had tried. It was like being seen because, for once, no one glared. (Beyond Wonderland, 2021)

EDM Festivals engage the rhetoric of carnival to call participants to perform ritualized rhetorical acts that symbolize their passage from the outside world, through liminal spaces, and finally, deep into a fantasy land where new imaginations of gender and sexuality become possible. To be immersed in liminality is to exist in a rhetorical space where connections between two disparate ontologies make social change possible.⁹⁴ Rhetoricians have used the concept of liminality to explore the rhetorical strategies made possible by appeals to a state of in-betweenness. For rhetoricians, this in-betweenness represents a space between two worlds, text and context, between nation-states as they meet at borders, and between life and death in the haunting rhetoric that connects one realm to another. Between two domains, rhetors have access to some of the resources of each, but the entirety of neither. They are “outsiders within” two

rhetorical worlds, capable of communicating with, for, and because of each, and consequently capable of fostering reimaginings of life on either side.⁹⁵

The concept of liminality can shift rhetors' view of "the available means of persuasion."⁹⁶ For example, Charles E. Morris III famously argues that reading the discourse created by marginalized individuals as rhetoric from "the closet" reveals otherwise overlooked rhetorical contexts.⁹⁷ Morris continues that by illuminating previously hidden discourses, rhetoricians could use critical understandings of liminality to identify potentially queer or otherwise socially progressive messages. For Robert DeChaine, the liminal state encouraged by embodied research allows critics to "cross lines of individual and social identity, across boundaries of culture and difference."⁹⁸ Ultimately, DeChaine recommends embodied research to scholars interested in blurring the divide between textual analysis and contextual understanding, arguing that the combination can allow for deeper understanding of the function of rhetoric as it is lived within communities. Joshua Gunn calls haunting the liminal rhetoric that emerges from the spaces between live and recorded speech.⁹⁹ Gunn argues that performance is a way of being that embodies liveness and the haunting voices of spectrality at once. Laura Lengel further considers how music, as a communicative form that engages liminality between discourse and nondiscursive appeals, allows women to perform inside *and* outside of the expectations of their communities.¹⁰⁰ Lastly, Christine Gardner shows how Christian discourses that rely on tactics like essentializing to minoritize LGBTQ individuals can "create the conditions for the emergence of rhetorical agency" among "gay Christian college students."¹⁰¹

Rhetorical agency among LGBTQ college students who assert their right to be both gay *and* Christian is a nuanced example of the rhetorical possibilities created by the connection in states of liminality. Gardner's essay illustrates how accessing liminal arguments, originating

somewhere between the life worlds created by the white Evangelical tradition and living an LGBTQ identity, can create possibilities for claiming the right to exist in between. Gardner's work is built on an established tradition of rhetorical criticism that illuminates the capacity for liminal rhetorics to influence change in social norms, practices, and beliefs. DeChaine, for example, suggests that the liminal characteristics of musical performance can create understanding "across lines of individual and social identity, across boundaries of culture and difference."¹⁰² Gunn shows that the rhetorical capacity of liminality is not limited to making progressive social change. He argues that haunted recordings of 9/11 victims encourage audiences to embrace a "political amnesia" that forgets the geopolitical circumstances that preceded the events of September 11th.¹⁰³ Having established that for rhetoricians, liminality is a state of being that (1) connects two disparate ontologies within a third in-between world and (2) creates possibilities for social change therein and potentially beyond.

I now turn to discuss how festival infrastructure, performer participants, and participant performers enact gender and sexuality via liminality at EDM festivals. Setting the stage for a fantastic rhetorical experience of carnival requires staging. Meticulous staging requires building massive infrastructure. Attending a festival is like taking part in participatory theatre. Festival infrastructure rapidly transports participants from the political reality of everyday life into a fantasy world. Festival infrastructure is diverse, consisting of fencing, stages, hospitality areas, constructed photo opportunities, and security checkpoints. This chapter focuses on the material rhetorical messages made possible by festival fencing, photo opportunity areas, and stages. Each of these aspects of festival infrastructure contributes to the overall community performance of gender and sexuality in the context of EDM festivals. Fencing, photo ops, and stages all fuse together, creating a unique rhetorical experience for every raver and supporting participatory

engagement with the fantasy of raving. I begin performative participation observation by walking, as a raver does, through the process of entering an EDM festival. My participatory experiences demonstrate that fencing is a material rhetorical resource capable of transporting participants from their everyday lives, through liminal spaces, and into the rave fantasy that intensifies at “the rail.”¹⁰⁴

Hard Summer, Beyond Wonderland, and Nocturnal Wonderland each had their parades. Security guards lined the sidewalks, which we were not allowed to walk on, creating a second line of defense in front of the roughly twelve-foot-tall chain link fence outfitted with dark mesh that stood behind. After all, this was a parade, and we were the featured attraction. Fences grew shorter but gave more and more direction. Once inside, attendees experienced a shift in audience. During the entrance parade, residents, businesses and patrons, and security officers served as a passive audience for attendees. Some gawked, others cheered and danced along. They kept to the sidewalks where we were explicitly banned. We became our audience once we passed through those two missing panels, and the fencing was cut down. (Summer, 2021)

Carnival is a performative rhetorical practice and fencing is a critical component of the staging of carnival. Setting the stage is as mechanical as it is symbolic. The infrastructure used for music festivals must fulfill multiple functions. It must keep attendees protected from both bodily harm and intrusion from outsiders. Neither would be possible without extensive fencing systems that adapt to the physical landscape and the needs and desires of festival attendees and planners. Fencing also provides messaging regarding directionality and performance scripts. In

other words, fences are critical components of infrastructural and fantastic rhetoric of festivals because they tell attendees where to go and what to do when they get there.

Rhetorical scholars have noted how border walls materialize racist social hierarchies between white Americans and BIPOC, especially Mexican immigrants and Mexican Americans.¹⁰⁵ Raves and national border sites are very different places with radically different experiences and power relationships. Nonetheless, some of the insights rhetorical critics have offered in relation to national border walls and liminality might be instructive when examining other types of border constructs. The wall at the Southern border of the United States materially and symbolically divides the two lands, erasing the liminal space between them where each culture meets and creates a third. Rhetorical scholars also have investigated how border walls extend to nearby ICE detention centers, where chain-link fencing maintains a white supremacist hierarchy by containing Black and Brown persons who have crossed the Southern border together in close quarters. Karma Chávez shows how ICE detention centers, and the fencing that defines them, bring Black and Brown persons in the centers into a community with one another despite critical cultural differences.¹⁰⁶ The communities that form in ICE detention centers emerge from dire need and deplorable conditions in the makeshift holding cells that look more like dog crates than human dwellings.

Life at the border is extremely different from the experience ravers have when they willfully opt into attending festivals. In the last paragraph, I described rhetorical scholarship that considered the coercive nature of fencing and how marginalized communities survive in the bounds of their hegemony. My analysis will add to that discussion by considering the resistive or liberatory potential of the embodied haptic relationships created by festival fencing. The embodied haptic relationships (i.e., close-quarters familiarity) performed in detentions centers

are also to be expected at raves, albeit differently. To get a glimpse of artists, participants must often move deep into crowds. Once within, there are usually no quick ways out. In some cases, this has led to tragedy.¹⁰⁷ But at most modern festivals, the festival formation, or tightly packed audience making a fan-like shape outward from a stage, is a harmless tradition that facilitates embodied connections that encourage dancing, crowd surfing, moshing (for fun!), and otherwise positive relationships between ravers.

I couldn't get over how many people were in front of me, and how many were still sorting in. All these people together looked like water molecules in an ocean, swaying in time with one another. They were loosely connected and somehow also tightly packed. They smiled and laughed with one another. Comfortable strangers. I looked to each side, hardly able to make out the shadow of chain-link fencing to my left and to my right behind thousands of bodies piling on top of one another. I saw no quick way out and shuddered. But by the smiles, willful dancing, and kandi exchanges I saw all around me, I gathered I was the only one concerned. (Hard Summer, 2021)

The fencing infrastructure I have described represents what fencing *can* be. In one sense, fencing can create valuable connections within communities that highlight shared needs and common ground. On the other hand, it can symbolize binary separations between ravers and non-ravers, between cultures, and between nations that often reinforce racist hierarchies. Both tendencies are displayed in the chain-link fences used to separate festivals from the outside world and bring festivities into close contact. Yet fencing is only one part of the complex festival infrastructure.

Participants have photo opportunities early on. Branded art installations are popular displays near the entry of each festival. Hard Summer's entrance stood most strikingly against the cloudless and unusually blue California desert sky. Beyond Wonderland beckoned participants to enter through a tunnel adorned with psychedelic flower lights. Synthetic smoke blurred the several hundred ravers passing through and muffled the vibration of the massive speakers just beyond. The haze also made it difficult to take a deep breath, encouraging passing festies to keep moving toward the larger festival beyond. As we walked through, electric bulbs illuminated plastic daisies in time with the rhythm of a faded tune that became more and more distinct as one neared the other side-the festival side of the entrance. These areas represent an important place of passage or liminal space between the outside world and the most extreme depths of the festival. They act as portals, rapidly moving passersby into the innermost enclaves of rave culture.

First Photo Opportunities, or FPOs, are semi-permeable barriers that allow participants in and leak out photographic evidence of the joy to be had beyond. My embodied participation helped me to understand how FPOs contribute to the process of pulling ravers deeper into the nucleus of EDM fantasy, as I reflect below.

Not unlike my fellow festivalgoers, I stopped at the HARD sign for my own first photo-op. The larger-than-life HARD sign was designed in technicolor and placed on a large lime green section of AstroTurf. It beckoned festival attendees

to stop and document their crossover into the rave world. Everyone had to pass by here. The space reads, “take your photos and say goodbye to the outside world; come join in the fantasy awaiting beyond.” (Hard Summer, 2021)

The staged photo areas offer points of connection for participants to engage their peers in



Figure 1(Photo provided by author.)

the outside world. Backdrops are made Instagram-ready. Bright contrasting colors and stage lights make for the best possible selfies. Participants even wait in long lines to snap photos in front of branded material. This highly porous area represents a possibility for leakage. These liminal spaces represent the rhetorical conditions necessary for festival rhetoric to have an impact in the outside world and vice versa. This outcome is in line with how rhetoric scholars think about social media platforms’ relationship to social change.¹⁰⁸ Online social platforms represent a liminal space where community members can come together to plan their strategies and reach out to broader audiences. FPOs allow participants to make plans with other ravers through common hashtags and location markers. Photos taken in front of branded backdrops are also free advertising for huge corporate conglomerates when they are posted to social media.

Consequently, ravers facilitate the leakage of their PLUR culture to the outside world while simultaneously serving corporate interests. The shadow of capitalist intent lurks over much of the potential for rave culture to transform social norms. Yet, the beckoning of FPOs directs ravers through the spaces in ways that pull participants deeper into a fantasy where imaginations of new freedoms in the performance of sex and gender intensify.

In addition to guiding participants out of the natural world and into a fantasy, FPO's also sanctioned early performances of the community ethos of EDM. Ravers pose with peace signs, fans, flags, and often with folk they just met. Newcomers can hear instructions from rave veterans much as I did as I rested and had a smoke before diving into my first festival. I wrote gingerly in my fieldnotes about my first kandi exchange just a few feet away from the glowing "HARD" sign.

A young man I had just met proudly told me that even though this was the first EDM festival he had ever been to, he had already received his first piece of kandi, handmade beaded bracelets and other jewelry that EDM fans exchange at raves. He followed by almost whispering, "and I learned the thing too!" The thing he spoke of was the ritualized tradition of exchanging kandi. My acquaintance showed me how to match up our fingers in a peace sign and then a heart, and then to interlace them, roll the kandi from one person's arm to the other, and end the exchange with a hug or kiss on the cheek (we went hug) as a sign of "respect." (Hard Summer, 2021)

This kandi exchange was a critical moment of cultural disclosure between him and me. This is especially true because the liminal characteristics of FPOs make them some of the only suitable spaces for carrying out in-depth verbal conversations about EDM culture and the code of

PLUR ethics that guides it. In my many hours of fieldwork, never again did someone explain a kandi exchange and its meaning in such detail. After passing through the FPO and traveling ever nearer to the main performance stages at festivals, the rhetorical conditions that create disorientation increase, making verbal communication more difficult. This means that, more than any other space in the festival experience, stages call for embodied approaches to understanding the fantastic rhetoric of festivals.

It's hard for me to comprehend the sea of people before me after the hour-long trip to arrive here from the entry. A young man in a backward hat and sweat-drenched T-shirt holds a balloon out towards me. He presses it against my chest and shouts, "feel this!" I feel rage spike inside me. I recognize the feeling of my fist jerking closed and preparing to swing. But then, I feel what he means. A beat building in the speakers around us had just dropped, and the vibrations were amplified through the balloon. My skeptically straight lip curled impulsively into a smile, and I laughed so loudly I heard my voice crack above the crowd. The boy I thought was executing an assault skipped away in a daze. He never touched me. The five-inch rubber barrier between us provided more personal space between him and me than any other two ravers were afforded in front of that stage. He helped me feel the rhetorical might of a bass dropping for tens of thousands of people. It positively overwhelms the senses! (Hard Summer, 2021)

Stages facilitate fantastic rhetorical possibilities of EDM festivals because of *where* they are in relation to the rest of the festival infrastructure and *how* they are built. In other words, stage locations on the carnival parade route of EDM festivals and their various adornments, which are ubiquitous across the three major festivals I study, come together to make the most

intense performative moments of the festival. The location and design of EDM's main stages make a rhetorical experience so far removed from that of everyday life that they may even seem other-worldly. These other worlds, as Bakhtin reminds, may be fantasies, but for participants, they are real. They are life worlds that are a part of constituting identity. Being in front of a stage represents being present at the climax of a carnival experience. For Bakhtin and rhetoricians who have used his theories, fantasy is critical to constructing social order among communities. It is the ritual uncrowning of a king, or in a more modern sense, a dominant rhetorical environment. The infrastructural components of stages, including location and design, manifest a lived experience so absurd and seemingly impossible yet so tangible that other impossibilities become imaginable in the shifted context.

Stages can manifest experiences that orient and disorient participants to rhetorical messages about the performance of gender and sexuality. Main stages are located deep within the festival grounds. Notes from my participant observations are filled with adjectives recounting tiredness when I arrived at any main stages. "Exhausted," "blisters," "thirsty," and "faint" drag down the otherwise happy tone in my journals. I gave up my spot on "the rail" more quickly at each set. The advertisement-laden chain link fences roughly eight feet high encircled each main stage to separate it from another. After the sun went down, weary-looking ravers would rest their backs against these fences, both standing and sitting. Wondering how long it took from my arrival at each festival until I found myself in front of a main stage, I began to track the distance on my phone. I frequently walked two or more miles during this process and more than seven during most festival days. The main stage is the end of the carnival parade and the place where massive audiences stop, coagulate, and perform together for sustained periods. As such, the activities here are highly privileged, or what movement scholars might describe as enclaved.¹⁰⁹

Even though all festival spaces allow for some interruptions from the discourse of the outside world, the stage areas' location at the end of the EDM parade allows for the fewest such interruptions when compared to other sites on the festival grounds.

Even when interruptions occur, they are easily blurred by the design of festival stages. Main stages are massive, separating even the closest fans at "the rail" from famous DJs by placing paid performers ten or more feet above a tiered audience. Their size allows them to accommodate some of the most extensive mechanical staging in the live music industry. Each main stage (there are usually two-to-four at each festival) features massive speakers, usually just in front of the stage but also strategically placed midway through the audience to amplify the experience for the thousands in attendance. They each use extensive laser light shows usually queued with supplemental videos that play behind the DJs. Almost every headlining performance also used pyrotechnics, and every festival evening I attended closed the evening with a fireworks display that would rival any small town's Fourth of July celebration. Should remnants of the outside world manage to make their way through despite all the stage design I have just described, stages also often emanate dense synthetic fog from machines that are nearly indistinguishable from the other high-tech paraphernalia that road crews set up and tear down in a matter of hours.

The stage area's location and design create an infrastructural enclave where the community members can perform gender and sexuality for one another. In these enclaves, communities discuss, practice, and in the case of EDM/ rave communities, perform new rhetorical arguments by breaking the rules of heteronormative patriarchy. This was the case in my interaction with the boy with the balloon, wherein a stage area facilitated an important reconsideration of consent. Our interaction demonstrates how the enclaved characteristics of the

stage areas rework the proxemics of consent. Participants pay for access to festivals with full knowledge that thousands (sometimes tens or hundreds of thousands) will be in attendance. There is no expectation of the maintenance of personal space, and in many festival contexts, women attendees report sexualized contact to which they didn't consent.¹¹⁰ I observed festivalgoers managing this issue by apologizing, smiling, nodding, dancing, and otherwise verbally and nonverbally recognizing that they were breaking the rules of proxemics dominant in outside world discourse about consent.

Other community members who respond in kind affirm the transgression but allow it presumably for lack of a better option available for those who wish to pass into and through the heart of stage areas. Indeed, the glances, vibrations, and dance motions balloon boy and I performed consent publicly and nonverbally. This experience exemplifies the possibility of discussing consent in public. In public dialogue, discussions about consent are often interrupted by “noise” from political or popular culture. Noise can be literal, like the beat of a drum. It can also be metaphoric, as in disinformation, logical fallacies, or bigoted remarks that encourage sexual assault survivors and their allies to keep their negotiations about consent private. The logical result is that sexual violence remains the individual problem of survivors, primarily women, and not a community problem. My other participant experiences suggest that festivalgoers (1) perform discourses of consent in public and (2) find ways to do so over the volume of building-size speakers that mimic the arresting noise of gendered and sexual inequities in everyday life.

One rhetorical tool that ravers have at their disposal for performing the politics of consent even amidst the overwhelming experience of being within a crowd of thousands of individuals is their PLUR kandi exchange ritual. As previously described, PLUR stands for peace, love, unity,

and respect, and each time ravers exchange kandi, they perform a nonverbal gesture meant to symbolize each word in the acronym. The quick and nonverbal exchanges ravers share before performing “respect” show how they communicate a consent to touch. A raver knows that their exchange partner prefers a hug if they open their arms wide, a kiss if they offer their cheek or pursed lips, or a high five if they offer a raised and open palm. In each exchange I witnessed, there was a noticeable pause and glance between exchanged by participants, followed by one of these nonverbal indicators before the ritual went on. This ritual places respect, especially for another’s bodily autonomy, in the enactment’s final and most negotiable part. When conducted amid a crowd, especially the dense crowds in front of main stages, the negotiation becomes public, subject to scrutiny from onlookers. Kandi exchanges take place in full view of co-participants. They require no spoken words, and the familiar gestures that indicate how one consents to perform “respect” are big enough to be recognizable to folx like me with moderate to severe vision impairment. Thankfully, most of the public performances of consent that I witnessed, especially during kandi exchanges, seemed positive. Some even garnered verbal affirmations from onlookers who would shout things like “you’re beautiful!” or “Love you, babe,” to neither participant in particular.

Non-consensual touching indeed happens at these events, showing that a PLUR ethos is not enough to overcome the culture of assault. However, the nonverbal performance of consent this ritual enables and supports stands in stark contrast to verbal-private versions of consent that remain in the realm of the individual and interpersonal. Consent becomes something to be commented on by strangers, praised, and presumably enforced should other festies notice a participant breaking the rules of PLUR.

Increased public discourse about consent is critical to counteract rape culture. The entrenched nature of sexual violence against women is evidence of the challenge feminist messages incur when they are interrupted by patriarchal noises. This mimics the difficulty of having public performances of consent that are understood by mass communities in sensorially overwhelming situations. Ravers who attempt to whisper to one another frequently miss the message. The sound level of festival size speakers is often too high to overcome with normal human vocal capacities. Relatedly, much of the public performance of consent becomes nonverbal, gestural, and facial. While I hold out hope that gender equality in the outside world is not physically impossible, ravers demonstrate strategies for sustaining public discourse in difficult situations, a critical concern of intersectional feminists and other critically inclined intellectuals. Another way that festies develop their characters, and hence their public performance of gender/ sexuality, is in their costumery.

Costumes, or “fits” as they are known to ravers, are a vital element that attendees bring to contribute to the fantastic rhetoric of festivals. Even though each set is highly individual to the character that the wearer develops, most include symbols of various connections to EDM and rave communities. Many, if not most, are hyper-sexual characters. And despite their diversity, festival fits often include accessories that serve performative and practical functions for attendees. Before discussing some of the hallmarks of festival costumes, I’d like to address how I operationalize rhetorical constructions of the gender binary, especially as they relate to attire, in the next section.

Festivals cannot escape the pressure of the status quo of gendered dressing that exists in the outside world. Feminist rhetoricians recognize that social expectations related to gender and dress have played a key role in movements for women’s equality, at least since the early

1900s.¹¹¹ More than a century later, the politics around attire continue to inspire the work of feminist critics who recognize the many ways that the gendered politics of dressing plays out in the wardrobes of female politicians as well as pop stars. For instance, Hillary Clinton's pantsuits became a popular point of critique in both the 2008 and 2016 elections. Deborah Tannen acknowledges that for modern female politicians, attire choices contribute to the double bind between performing to the heteronormative expectations of womanhood and the masculine norms of political leadership in the U.S. Therefore, fashion is a part of what Karrin Vasby Anderson terms the "presidentiality paradox" or the impossible standards for political discourse that render "every woman the wrong women," by judging their speech, including nonverbal communication like attire, as simultaneously too feminine to be authoritative or too commanding to be considered traditionally feminine.¹¹²

Women in music cannot escape a similar double bind.¹¹³ They are often faced with the choice of styling themselves as hypersexualized divas or shirking expectations and being relegated to the ranks of "alternative" artists, a less financially lucrative career path.¹¹⁴ Even if female musicians opt out of hypersexualized pop stardom, pop stars often see their careers decline well before middle age. Pop culture frequently writes off female pop stars as "hot messes" or "hacks" who are "washed up" and face scorn in popular culture for performing feminine sexuality beyond their twenties.¹¹⁵ Festival experiences create a rhetorical fantasy wherein the gendered politics of dress are transgressed, thus offering a model for escaping the double binds levied against those who venture to do so. I argue that the hypersexuality and hyper-individuality of rave fits verbally affirmed by rave communities at festivals set an expectation that there is both no requirement to accede to the norms of modesty circulated in patriarchal societies and no specific or correct way of performing one's gender or sexuality.

Ravers put the performance of gender and sexuality at the core of their community rituals. For instance, consider the relatively skin-bearing fit staples worn by participants. When I say that many ravers' fits are relatively skin-bearing, I analyze attire from a U.S. American perspective. I do not take this perspective to reiterate patriarchal logic that shames nudity and the human body, especially women's bodies. However, I wish to point out that the festival fantasy takes place in Southern California. Despite its reputation for progressive politics and diverse populations, SoCal is still subject to rhetorics of patriarchal dominance that have animated U.S. history.¹¹⁶ The thongs, pasties, and fishnet stockings women wear challenge the culture of modesty rampant in the United States.¹¹⁷ Thong underwear are some of the most mundane of the hypersexual artifacts worn by ravers. Cheeky swimsuits, after all, have been around since at least the 1980s. Still, they tend to turn heads in public outside of somewhere like Malibu or Manhattan Beach. Pasties are primarily used by women but also by some performing masculinity as well as gender queerness. They are adhesive stickers made to cover only the nipple, leaving the rest of the breast exposed. Exposing most of the breast in the outside world would be considered inappropriate, and in some situations even illegal for some women. At festivals however, wearing pasties is as mundane as wearing a t-shirt to the grocery store. The commonplace nature of pasties at raves contrasts from Western culture wherein skin bearing outfits like these are relegated to strip clubs, burlesque shows, or other realms of sexual subculture.

In addition to bearing more skin than is often considered appropriate within dominant western American and Eurocentric cultures, ravers indicate their focus on sexuality by incorporating the artifacts of several sexual subcultures into their fits. Sexual subcultures referenced in ravers' fits include BDSM, Furrries, and Strippers/Sex Workers. Artifacts of sex work culture appear as fishnet stockings and super high platform heels.¹¹⁸ BDSM culture appears

as chains and leather accessories worn by ravers.¹¹⁹ In more than one scenario, participants walked their peers around festival grounds on leashes. Furrries, a relic of the 1980s sexual freedom movement, appear in fluffy raver boots and animal ears.¹²⁰ Ravers sometimes represent a conglomerate of sexual subcultures. Participation in these sexual subcultures outside the festival context risks public shaming, hinting at a motive for ravers to participate in EDM festivals. In festival spaces, sexuality is constantly in flux, and performing alternative sexualities or affiliation with a sexual subculture or “kink” culture is not only accepted but encouraged.

The practice of hyper-individual character development is somewhat unique to rave communities. Other mass gatherings with theatrical elements take place on a similar scale to EDM festivals. Rock and roll concerts, for example, are known to attract audiences dressed mostly in denim and black or other darkly colored concert t-shirts. Comic Cons are mass gatherings of comic, animation, anime, and other pop culture super fans who frequently compete to see who can most faithfully re-create the persona of a favored character in costume. Other massive concerts that come with an unspoken dress code similarly produce homogenously dressed audiences. Comic Cons have undeniably opened doors for the radically weird and progressively minded.¹²¹ Nevertheless, it provides a valuable counterexample to the expectations around attire at EDM festivals. For ravers, hyper individual performances of one’s character (including their gender and sexual identities) is an ironic but expected performance of community connection. Dance music fans verbally affirm community members’ ability to create a hyper individual character from the innumerable possible combinations of a few rave staples.

A common practice in rave or EDM communities is the exchange of verbal affirmations of fits. This often occurs as a public exchange of communication between two or more unacquainted parties. They can be as simple as “I love your fit” or “great hat! They are handed

out without provocation and seemingly indiscriminately. As a bashful but grateful and observant recipient of some of these verbal affirmations, I experienced a disproportionate amount of



Figure 2 (Photo provided by author.)

compliments focused on the individualized components of my costume. By that, I mean public and verbal affirmations of my costume design, by in large, focused on the individuality of my character like my one-of-a-kind hat band, or country-western take on a goth aesthetic. This echoed in verbal assurances that I heard others give to one another throughout the festival. Friends I made, for example, were complimented on their one-of-a-kind hats, pashminas, and face makeup. When compliments praised common aspects of costumes, they focused on the peculiarity added by the wearer. Ravers praise one another for specific charms or pendants rather than on a kandi collection as a whole. For example, in my kandi collection, a raver is more likely to publicly affirm the colors of one bracelet, the intricacy of the necklace, or the hues of particular beads a pearder before they would give a generalized compliment of the

collection. This further evinces that individuality is a crucial component of the rhetorical costumery of festivals. As the piece of kandi in the above photo shows, PLUR's rhetoric of inclusion is predicated on highly diverse inclusion and respect for one's autonomy over their character development. I reflected on this aspect of the rave world in my field notes from the summer of 2021.



Figure 3 (Photo provided by author.)

Butterflies, wooks, rave moms, goths, goth witches, princesses, steampunks, leather daddies, leather mommies, Playboy bunnies, many, many shirtless men, disco cowboys and cowgirls, baseball jerseys. Despite my dozens of hours out here, I cannot attest to ever witnessing two precisely identical costumes. A few staples are shared across the community. . . fishnet stockings, beaded jewelry, ass bearing anything. Still, the probability of any two festival attendees creating the same costume is next to none. (Nocturnal Wonderland, 2021)

Out of respect for EDM communities and the parameters of my IRB approval, I do not feature photos of other ravers in this manuscript. Instead, I worked to embody the spirit of ravers' character development with my costumes. From HARD to Beyond to Nocturnal, I continuously incorporated my deeper understanding of rave rituals into my fits. At the same time, the individuality of my character developed in line with the PLUR ideal of respect. EDM communities perform respect through verbal affirmations of autonomy and individuality in costume design. The previous narrative vignette demonstrates an important moment in the costume design phase that built my character. At first, I tried to adhere heavily to the community rituals of gender performance. Only after removing the synthetic hair I had seen braided into other young women's looks and donning my favorite hat and adorned with a token of my

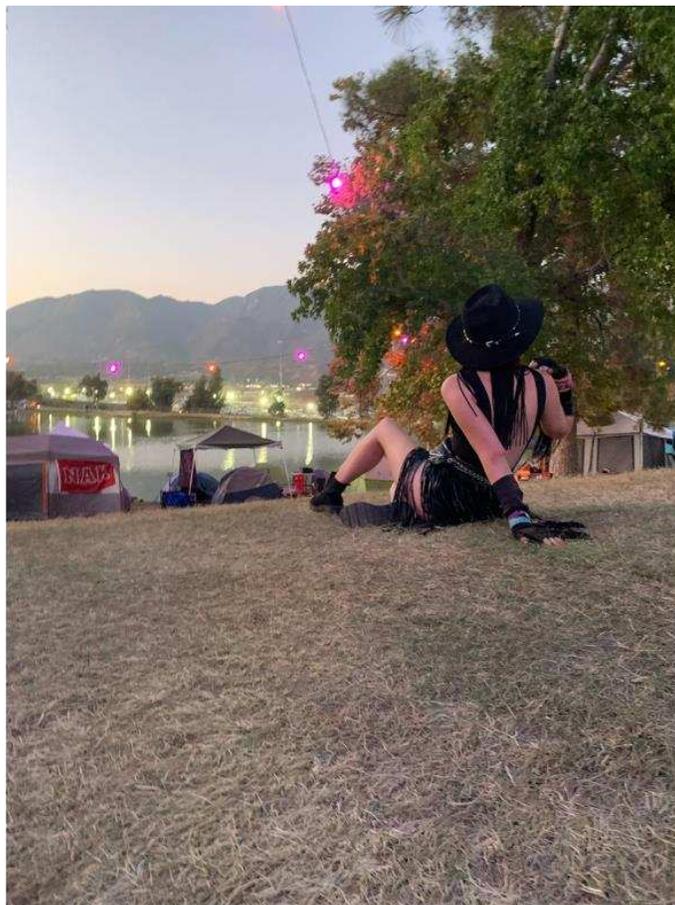


Figure 4 (Photo provided by author.)

childhood did I begin to feel comfortable as my character. As I attended more festivals, I increasingly embraced an adventurous western persona as my character performance. These mementos of my past anchored my festival character and her performances of gender and sexuality back to the larger cultural context of the modern American West. In this way, character development via fit is yet another example of a liminal performance between a raver's outside world and the fantasy of the one they work to make real, if only for a few days.

While public verbal affirmations of fits tend to center on the highly individual, ravers are prolific performers of their communal connections. Wearing wristbands and kandi are two fundamental ways ravers perform these connections in their attire. Each of these accessories is evidence of a raver's past performance in festivals. Looking at my photographs, you can see my collection of wristbands growing along with my kandi. Knowing some things about the rave community before I began my participation, I had anticipated the importance of caring for my kandi. Still, I underestimated the wristband's cultural cachet, as the following brief vignette illustrates.

When it came time to remove my wristband, I struggled at it and audibly huffed when I couldn't quickly slip it over my wrist. One of my friends laughed at my frustration and commented, "you put it on too tight." They gestured to their wristband as they slipped it and several others quickly off their arms. I preceded to fight with my own, attempting to get it off in one piece. Eventually, I succeeded. I also did not make that same mistake twice. (Hard Summer, 2021)



Figure 5(Photo provided by author.)

The preceding narrative illustrates the rhetorical significance of wristbands as an artifact of rave attire. Attire norms are so ingrained within EDM communities that it was a comical faux pas for me to put on my wristband without first knowing how to wear it. In other words, loose enough to be removed intact but not so open as to risk losing it or alarming security. For ravers, wristbands document where, when, and how many times they have participated in community performances. They indicate when two ravers have attended the same show, how deeply invested they might be in the scene, and what sorts of experiences they have opted into within the rave community. The significance of wristband collections was evident in my peers' extensive collection that evening. Their collection resembled the thousands I also observed on others at each of the three festivals I attended. The thicker collections covered ravers' entire forearms almost like a removable sleeve tattoo. Bands sitting atop bands grabbed my attention with their colorful tones and busy designs stacked on top of one another to look like a whole pack of lifesaver candies resting tightly next to one another. The more I participated, the thicker my own stack of bands became. I decided, out of practicality, to wear my bands on my right arm and

kandi on my left. The bands represented my individual experiences in the rave community, while my kandi represented experiences I shared with *others*

Many festivals, including each of the ones I attended, have kandi stations where participants can craft jewelry to exchange with one another. Beads are available to represent every letter of the alphabet and Arabic numerals 0-9. There are innumerable different decorative beads made available, some of which have photos printed on them with emojis or other images. The infinite combinations made possible by the pop beads that comprise kandi mean that no two are likely to be precisely the same. Again, the performance of community via attire has a hybrid function. Attire in the form of kandi is at once identification and non-identification.¹²² Elements of costumery like kandi allows ravers to perform hyper-individuality and membership within the community simultaneously.

Pieces of costumery like wristbands and kandi are important tactics that EDM audience members use to develop their character identities within the fantasy world. These pieces document bygone festivals and capture the fleeting individuality of each experience. The development of raver fits over time and across festivals is yet another example of the liminal nature of carnival. Ravers use wristbands and kandi over and over again, meaning they must leave the fantasy of the rave in order to return with individuals to their next show. These actions represent the flow of fantastic rhetoric moving outward for the enclave of the festival into festies' everyday lives. Donning and removing kandi and wristbands represent moving closer and further away from the radical messages made possible by raves. Neon beads and plastic jewelry tend to stand out when worn by the average middle-aged professional to the office on the average workday. Ravers take their kandi and wristbands with them when they leave the festivals anyway. They care for them, show them off, and add to their collections over years. The

awesome power of disorientation might be an important clue about why festies preserve and perform their experiences at multiple festivals by carrying kandi and other pieces of their fits out of the fantasy world, into the real, and back out again

Tonight, is the last night at Nocturnal, meaning it is my last night of in situ observations. I know that the only way to survive is to lean in. It feels like eating spicy food. The only thing that will relieve the pain is consuming more. When I get close to the stages, the ground shakes so hard that it feels like it could turn the rubber soles of my boots into hot magma. The bass sounds shake my body so hard that I doubt my feet are even touching the ground. The intensity feels almost like a massage, distracting me from the pain in my joints and the hunger in my belly. The headache that blinded me moments before is soothed, if only for a moment. This feels like meditation, a disconnect from my body, a means of making me float along to the rhythm. (Nocturnal Wonderland, 2021)

Upon arriving at the furthest reaches of the festival grounds, it is evident that the bass rhythms and notes are some of the most potent rhetorical tactics used by DJs within the festival experience. Infrastructure is primarily the work of planners. Character development is the domain of attendees. The vibrations that shake festival stages are the production of DJs. DJs are the celebrity performers of EDM.¹²³ The DJ's primary instruments are various mixing technologies. Some DJs use turntables to scratch and spin and otherwise manipulate a vinyl record to remix one or multiple tracks into a cohesive dance music set. EDM DJs also mix in intense beat drops or moments of heavy bass sounds that follow a rhythmic and tonal buildup of intensity.

Beat drops are a sonic experience that creates suspense for listeners by following a build up with a brief moment of silence before adding back in deep bass sounds or “dropping the beat.” Music scholars explain that when a DJ drops a beat, they are “bringing in the bass drum after a breakdown or removal.”¹²⁴ Ravers described these rich bass sounds with adjectives that suggest disorienting experiences like “face-melting,” and “sick,” or “stinky.” DJs play with temporality related to beat drops, extending build-ups, shortening and lengthening silences, or saturating tracks with heavy bass that can quickly indulge audiences’ expectations of dance music. Mark Butler explains: “Many DJs drop the beat in an unexpected location after a prolonged intro, which serves as an effective means of getting the crowd's attention.”¹²⁵ For example, consider this compilation video of several of the beat drops performed by famed EDM DJ Rezz at her 2017 appearance at the Bonnaroo music festival.¹²⁶ At six seconds, a quick build-up is followed by a computer-generated voice that sings “Rezz.” The following silence is so brief, it takes place between six and seven seconds into the video. At seven seconds, Rezz mixes in deep bass sounds that prompt audience members to headbang--or thrash enthusiastically in time with the drop. As ravers headbang, their bodies mimic involuntary convulsive movement. Convulsions materialize at forty-two seconds when a woman headbangs while holding two iPhones in front of her chest that look as though they could be defibrillator paddles she is using to direct her movement to the quick succession of beat drops Rezz performs. Just as the electricity created by a defibrillator can be used to move a person from the realm of the dead to the realm of the living, the disorientation that can accompany intense beat drops is capable of shaking ravers out of their lifeworlds which are marred in patriarchy and the intersectional injustices.

The deep vibrations of EDM music, especially in instances of the beat drop, are such an intense physical experience that they tend to drown out all other communicative, sensory, and rational experiences, especially verbal exchanges between ravers. They also are the key component in what I am calling a rhetoric of disorientation. Disorientation is an embodied rhetorical strategy in which an audience's senses are overwhelmed, disrupting their relationships with physical and social worlds and therefore demonstrating how that which seemed impossible in other contexts can be achieved. Accordingly, disorientation is a rhetorical strategy that can help audiences think about and live in the world differently. Disorientation involves disrupting audience members' relationships within social worlds with embodied appeals that enable that which previously seemed impossible to be achievable. The strategy demonstrates how those social norms that seem insurmountable might be reformulated in rhetorical performances.

EDM engages disorientation especially through heavy bass drops played for audiences on massive speakers. The prominent arch of bass soundwaves, which are a hallmark of contemporary dance music, can shake ravers so intensely that they momentarily lose connection with the ground. The phenomenon is like experiencing an earthquake. Seismic waves can move the earth so deeply that they can disorient folk from their usual relationship with the ground and gravity. The seismic activity of earthquakes and the overwhelming bass sounds of EDM temporarily facilitate the impossibility of human flight. That music could be the key to flight seems unimaginable. However, at EDM festivals, ravers can feel themselves propelled upwards by beat drops. Festies can feel evidence that EDM is capable of suspending humans' known relationships to the physical world. They also embody an experience usually only achievable for those with privileged access to luxury playthings like jet packs or hot air balloons, or the ability

to afford increasingly expensive airfare.¹²⁷ The rhetoric of disorientation in the heavy bass sounds of EDM are so affectively potent that they can make new imaginations of performing community feel possible.¹²⁸ As such, it is an apt rhetorical tactic for encouraging audiences to rethink and redo norms of performing gender and sexuality characterized by patriarchy and misogyny. Disorienting rhetorics cannot erase the dominant gender ideologies that surround festivals, but they can soften and at least partially mute them. Even the deep bass vibrations experienced at the rhetorical nucleus of the festival cannot take place outside of the local, regional, and global rhetorics surrounding them. However, this rhetoric of disorientation can disrupt the well-established social relationships between individuals, especially those that uphold global heteronormative patriarchy.

Carnival requires a diverse cast of characters. No one who participates isn't *in* on the fact that the performance *is* a performance. It is a rhetorical setting wherein part of an audience is privy to messages that performers do not have to overtly state, or what Charles E Morris III calls "the fourth persona."¹²⁹ In other words, the fourth persona is the part of the audience that is in on the unspoken message. Morris builds upon important social scientific scholars like Dwight Conquergood, Ernest Goffman, and Clifford Geertz who extend concepts of the stage to examine the ways that social life is performative in lived contexts. These performance scholars worked from a perspective that the roles one plays within a given scene constitute how they relate to others within their *polis*.¹³⁰ They investigated how theories of performativity manifested in everyday life through participant observation of various communities. Research like theirs focused on otherwise veiled modes of performance that scholars accessed largely through participating along with the communities they studied. Similarly, critically inclined scholars like Morris developed concepts like the fourth persona to explain how non-dominant discourses

circulate within marginalized communities. Morris calls the coded messages covertly addressed to a collusive audience “textual winks” and contends that the intended recipients would understand the secret behind the gesture. Morris found the fourth persona especially important to queer audiences for whom rhetors could encode messages that would be dangerous if perceived by members of dominant groups.

Audiences have been engaging explicit and implicit messages contained in the carnival's performances from medieval times until the present. Accordingly, EDM festivals are co-created performances by planners, musical artists, DJs, attendees, hospitality workers, and many more. Performer-participants and participant-performers work simultaneously on constructing the carnival experience in EDM. Carnival is performed as a celebration; even when the political motivations of all parties involved are quite serious, the tradition comes with the social expectation of laughter and festiveness. A common communicative symbol of celebration the world over is live music performance. Indeed, the middle-aged carnival Bakhtin wrote about would have featured court musicians or performances by local artists. Rhetorical scholars have taken note of the carnivalesque possibilities in musical rhetorical strategies. Still, none yet have considered the feminist implications of the DJ's role as a celebrity of EDM and hired performer in charge of symbolizing celebration for audiences of tens of thousands at a time. The DJ's most significant contribution to the carnivalesque atmosphere of EDM festivals is heavy bass drops.

The DJ's primary instruments are various mixing technologies. Some DJs use turntables to scratch and spin and otherwise manipulate a vinyl record to remix one or multiple tracks into a cohesive dance music set. Others have embraced new technologies and highly computerized mixing technologies, sparking jokes in popular culture around the image of the “MacBook DJ.” DJs use these technologies to create live performances that are highly original and often

unrepeatable despite being a conglomerate of mainly pre-recorded sounds. A hallmark of EDM music is intense beat drops. DJs are known for creating extensive “build-ups” and “beat drops.”

DJs create excitement and expectation amongst their audiences with extensive repetitions of a few notes that generally accelerate in pace and increase in pitch before suddenly stopping, interrupted by a much lower set of notes of a new rhythmic pattern. “Bass Drops” are a moment of rhetorical disruption, so powerful when transmitted by the arena size speakers that DJs plug into that they can physically lift and move audience members, invoking the disorienting rhetorical tactics I described earlier in this chapter. By providing the music that can disorient audiences away from the socio-historical realities of an EDM party in the middle of the Mojave Desert and reorient them into a fantasy world where gender equity and sexual inclusivity are possible, DJs contribute a necessary component of EDM carnival. They, however, are not the kings imagined by Bakhtin. They do not undergo a ritual uncrowning. No audience member is allowed to kick the DJs out of their booths and take over their command of the stage, VIP areas, backstage access, and other markers of privilege. DJs’ largely unquestioned celebrity status may run against the subversive ethos that has characterized carnival to this point. It might also be a sign that DJs were never considered to rule over EDM communities in the first place. Despite their relative economic privilege over their audiences, many DJs dress down compared to festies. Many don’t speak at all. The festivals I attended each featured dozens of DJs. Some names were recognizable, but I met no one who could identify more than a handful of acts on the bill. A lucky few played to crowds of thousands, but many of the artists invited to DJ at EDM festivals are small-time acts with one or fewer albums to their name. So even though their contribution of bass and bass drops is necessary to creating the carnivalesque atmosphere of the festival I describe, it would remain incomplete without the contributions of participant performers.

EDM festivals are characterized by the attendance of tens of thousands of participant performers. Festies come in many types. The characters involved in carnival take on tropes or different character roles within the rave community. The presence of attendees not dressed in extravagant costumes is rare enough at these festivals to merit suspicious looks from other attendees. Even the most ubiquitous characters in rave communities known as wooks play a vital role in sustaining PLUR in the ranks. Wooks are stereotypically straight white men from positions of privilege that choose to live semi-transient lifestyles following EDM festivals across the country, wearing ill-fitting sweatpants and cloaked in a garment they offensively call a “pashmina” while demonstrating little cultural knowledge of the term.¹³¹ Co-participants at the festivals I attended explained that the folx on the grounds wearing baggy patchwork pants, denim or linen vests-often with no shirt underneath, unkempt facial hair, and dozens of kandi bracelets were the characters they were referring to with the term “wook.”

Wooks’ personas fully embrace a PLUR ethos, making their comfort with their many privileges a satirical embodiment of an uncritical raver. They demonstrate the contradictions of performing within rave communities that avow justice and equity minded politics while supporting predatory capitalist institutions. As such, they function like a jester character.¹³² They are unburdened by the social expectations of the modern world and empowered to transgress them at many points in the festival, but their character performance isn’t usually sanctioned outside the carnival. They represent ravers at their deepest level of engagement with fantasy. Accepting wooks’ place in EDM communities requires audience participants to witness the imperfect politics they perform themselves.

Rave communities feature wooks’ performances in multiple verbal and nonverbal communicative signals. Verbally, I witnessed festival attendees joking about the danger of

‘becoming a wook’ on more than one occasion. The implication is that ‘becoming a wook’ would signal that a raver is deeply overly-invested in the rave community. In the context of the festival fantasy, the caution sounds odd. Even though the wook is tolerated, even welcomed within festival worlds, the symbolic aspects of their character, he remains a cautionary tale. Notably, despite the many hours I spent in the field, and the dozens of times the word “wook” was used, it was not once used to describe a raver performing traditional aspects of femininity. In other words, the term is gendered masculine. This points to yet another exciting possibility for performing sex and gender created by the festival experience; that of masculine gendered characters performing maternity and thus femininity in the dual character role of the wook-rave mom.

As insomniacrave reports in *Urban Dictionary*, a rave mom is an EDM community member whose primary responsibility is to nurture other ravers’ physical and affective wellness. She is also very explicitly assigned a feminine persona. Rave moms perform their role in rave communities through the verbal statements, attire and artifacts, relative temperance, and specific dance performances and techniques set to EDM rhythms. Even though a rave mom is a revered character within the community, some aspects of the performances of maternity reify biological, binary, patriarchal, and heteronormative discourses about gender, sexuality, and especially feminine motherhood.

I first realized I was with “rave moms” after hearing them end dozens of encounters with strangers (quickly turned friends) with the phrase “stay hydrated.” The sun was punishing, and considering my own experiences with heat sickness at these things, I always appreciated the reminder. I noticed buttons and stickers incorporated into female ravers’ fits with the phrase. I noticed both “rave

mom” and “stay hydrated,” worn and uttered by grounds crew. They carried water bottles to offer to ravers whose faces had turned red in the desert sun.

(Beyond Wonderland, 2021)

Rave moms’ verbal interactions with the rest of the community, along with their fits, responsibilities, and performance methods are crucial components of their character’s archetype. Importantly rave moms are almost exclusively female characters within the festival fantasy. Rave moms have few but vital lines to memorize. Stay hydrated is the most common verbal indicator. If you do not have the opportunity to engage in discourse with a rave mom, you can still identify her via her ritualized components in her fit. Buttons and stickers may directly name the rave mom, but absent these indicators, a rave mom is defined by her actions. Whether a rave mom is giving another raver water, a quick fan down, a hug, a snack, or a light show, the rave mom can often be seen sacrificing her opportunity to delve deeper into the fantasy for the sake of another’s good time. In other words, she is a nurturer.

As nurturers, rave moms perform a rhetoric of maternity. Maternal rhetorics are familiar. They emanate from the status quo discourses of western societies that assume women are subordinate to men and heteronormativity as the dominant form of sexuality, reproduction, and family making. Feminists, however, have more than once invoked maternity and motherhood as ways of asserting power in communities that subvert their voices to men’s.¹³³ Rave moms’ maternal rhetoric exemplifies both of these traditions. Their performance of maternity alongside recognizable markers of femininity parallels the reproductive and nurturing requirements put upon women expected to perform to the expectations of the cult of true womanhood.¹³⁴ Maternal rhetorics performed by ravers carry the echoes of biological essentialism and gendered labor practices that have historically marginalized women. At the same time, making do is common

amongst many marginalized speech communities. Making do involves activating the rhetorical resources available from one's positionality, even if they are partial or imperfect.¹³⁵ Making do allows marginalized rhetors to exercise agency within an oppressive community system.

Even though rave moms engage in fantastical experiences alongside the rest of festival participants, the infrastructure, characters, and music that make up the festival cannot escape the influence of outside context. As a result, the verbal, nonverbal, and physical behavioral scripts available to rave moms are heavily influenced by patriarchy and patriarchal ideas about maternity. Even the term "rave mom" leaves gendered labor unquestioned and thus unchanged. However, my observations provide some evidence that rave moms access status quo performances of maternity and create new messages about the role of nurturers within rave cultures.

Traditional ideas about maternal nurturing assign the labor of physical and affective care of a child to women and women groups.¹³⁶ In the case of EDM, community members who performed the work of nurturing also performed the hallmarks of rave femininity. They wear fishnet stockings, thong underwear, face glitter, and high heels. Rave mom attire does not inherently challenge the idea that women are naturally meant to be caretakers. Clothing does, however, reveal daylight between dominant society's views about care contexts. Rather than confining their care to private spaces, Rave moms display their labor for the entire community. Moreover, they perform their care in entertainment spaces characterized by hyper-sexualized performances of gender and inspired by sexual subcultures. Some rave moms use flow to demonstrate their unique form of nurturing.

Flow artists are a special kind of raver. They use their interpretive dance practices to demonstrate the unique maternal rhetoric of EDM communities. Flow dancing can be seen as a

form of affective care. Receiving or witnessing a flow performance is a great honor and a clear demonstration of goodwill on the performer's part for their audience. They are meant to be joyful experiences that contribute to participants' overall good time and vibes. Flow incorporates hoops, whips, gloves, fire, lights, ribbons, staffs, and other instruments that physically and visually mimic the fluidity of sound. Flow is inspired by Polynesian dance traditions like Poi.¹³⁷ Flow is an interaction between music, performer, and audience that fuses each party's roles in the form of interactive and interpretive dance. Flow artists are capable of narrowing the festival experiences for attendees around individual layers of the EDM and smaller break-off audiences within the larger festival experience.¹³⁸

Flow artists' power emanates from their dance. Through dance, flow artists create a show within a show and an audience within an audience. Flow artists use the rhetorical resources within their communities to focus their listeners on pointed but manageable portions of otherwise overwhelming rhetorical experiences at festivals. I reflect here on an interaction with a flow artist at Beyond Wonderland.

I cannot focus my attention amid the loudness of the sensory experiences happening all around me, but I do not need to focus on the little lights on her fingertips. She moves them from my periphery to the nucleus of my focus for me. She dances with a leather whip. The chains wrapped around her waist crash and clink together as her hips move in time with my pulse. (Beyond Wonderland, 2021)

Flow artists are exceptionally well equipped to perform the sort of maternal care that is the occupation of the rave mom. This opens a crucial connection point, as many wooks are also flow artists. The wook character is gendered male, meaning the flow artistry common at EDM

festivals opens up the possibility for masculine characters to perform maternal rhetorics within their communities.

Flow can be an essential form of maternal care for ravers. The disorienting capacity of EDM festivals is, by nature, overwhelming, calling for supervision and a calming presence. As evidenced in the previous vignette, a flow performance can background the tremendous sound of multiple sets of dance music and call audiences to focus their attention on the performer in front of them. Their immediacy to co-participants contrasts with the distinct separation between audiences and DJs. Their movement can mimic syncopation with EDM beats when the tails of their whips crack at the end of an artist's favorite build-up, or the lights on their gloves emphasize weak notes that might otherwise go unnoticed. Their proximity to their audiences gives them access to facial and other nonverbal expressions that can enrich the connection between each. A responsive audience gives performers cues that help them improvise aspects of their presentation and tailor them to audience needs and desires.¹³⁹ These highly tailored and responsive forms of performance allow flow artists to better time their dancing to an audience's needs. Accordingly, a flow performance can feel specific to those involved, just as maternal nurturing is expected to be specific and tailored to recipients. However, much like maternity and parentage in real life, masculine rave characters sometimes transgress the gendered expectations of the outside world.

Wooks, the typically white, cisgender, masculine characters common to rave scenes, also sometimes perform flow. During my participant observations, I observed attendees dressed as wook characters performing flow with batons, lighted balls for juggling, and light-up gloves similar to those I described above. I accepted multiple light shows from attendees dressed in wook's clothing during my participant observation. Of note was a light show given to me by a

co-participant who called himself Tiger. He performed to the expectations of a wook character. He dressed in a faux fur jacket much too hot for the desert in July and wore kandi up and down his arms and larger pieces around his neck. His permanent tattoos referenced various EDM DJs, and he had gone so far as to give his rave personality a name to fit his fit. I accepted his performances as I struggled to enjoy the festival and continue to research amid a bout of intense heat sickness as I reflect below.

I grabbed the edges of the plastic bin. Less than 12 hours earlier, I had been on a plane, and I don't fly well. Even after sunset, the temperature remained above 80 degrees. I was dehydrated but determined to get my body back under my control. As I returned to a group of new friends, I noticed a man I did not recognize. A few acquaintances ask me if I am going to be all right. Half lying, I nod. The new addition interrupts, 'She's going to be just fine! She is strong, I can tell! Can I give you a light show?' I agreed. He pulled on two black gloves with white plastic tips, pressed a button, and began to wave his hands in time with whatever tune he felt like accessing from the complex soundscape. As I watched, my breathing slowed, my internal temperature cooled, and I felt my nausea begin to fade away. Soon enough, my new friends and I were off to the next stage with a new comrade in tow. (Beyond Wonderland, 2021)

Tiger's multi-role performances link masculine character roles to the feminine expression of care and nurturing. The moniker flow artists does not carry the exact gendered expectations of rave mom or wook, meaning those who embody both occupy a liminal character role that exists between binary constructions of gender and sexuality. Perhaps that is why this role allows EDM fans to bridge the division between femininity and masculinity in relation to care in rave

communities. When wooks use flow to focus their audience's attention around their limited but unique arrangements of EDM music, they embody the role of a rave mom. They care for overwhelmed participants like me with their performances, reach out to community members in distress, and contribute their labor to the good vibes and good times of other ravers. The wook artists who use flow as a form of care contribute yet another newly imagined expression of gender and sexuality to the festival experience.

There are three key performances of gender and sexuality that arise from my observations of performing carnival in the context of EDM festivals. Firstly, the hyper-sexuality pervasive in femme-coded rave fits, including those of so-called rave moms, rejects the modesty that the outside world often requires of women.¹⁴⁰ Hypersexualized performers across the spectrums of gendered and sexual expressions command respect in kandi exchanges. Women in little more than pasties, panties, and pantyhose are greeted with requests for their consent to move in closer before a light show and apologized to with the sorry eyes of other attendees who have little choice of how their body moves deep in the pits of festival audiences. In these settings, women can embrace sexuality with other community members guided by PLUR. The R of PLUR insists that respect not be predicated upon modesty. No matter what a woman's sexual predilections might be, she deserves the respect of receiving requests for her consent.

Respect being so central to EDM ethos and sexuality being on full display during festival experiences means that ravers enact consent as a public issue given public attention. Bringing the matter of consent to public attention differs from the dominant practice of relegating sex talk to the private sphere. I agree with the sentiment from women's liberation movements that keeping discourses about sex and consent in the private sphere supports rape cultures.¹⁴¹ Such silencing renders rape a personal issue rather than one supported by centuries-old practices of men owning

and controlling women's bodies. That nonverbal exchanges that make consent possible occur even in impossibly close quarters like the middle of mosh pits is remarkable. That both verbal and nonverbal discussions related to gaining one's consent take place throughout the festival grounds in full view and earshot of other attendees rewrites the appropriate context for discussing consent. Publicly performing consent brings anti-rape discourse into shared focus within EDM communities, making sexual violence *everyone's* issue.

Finally, EDM performances of carnival show how maternal rhetorics of care can be performed by folk who identify across the gender spectrum. I follow an established tradition of scholars interested in the social-rhetorical construction of motherhood.¹⁴² We agree that even though motherhood has a strong relationship to the feminized body, maternity and womanhood are not one and the same. The wook, who performs maternal care and nurturing through flow art, shows that male characters can naturally attune themselves to rhetorical performances usually coded feminine. When men publicly display their ability to foster their communities, respond to the needs of their peers, and sacrifice their labor for the enjoyment of others, they negate sexist stereotypes that separate men from intimate parentage and women from the choice of doing much else if they please. "*When I got close to the stages, the ground shook so hard that it felt like it could turn the rubber soles of my boots into hot magma. I doubted my feet were even touching the ground.*" (Hard Summer, 2021)

I end my discussion of the fantastic rhetoric of carnival by returning to this reflection because it suggests my most important conclusions about EDM's potential for manifesting new performances of gender and sexuality. Radical reinterpretations begin at the festival gates but only intensify as participants move deeper into the grounds, closer to massive speakers and crowds, and further into the fantasy. That such immense measures need to be taken to create

these experiences mimics the intense labor required to make material advances toward gendered and sexual equity in the outside world. Carnival is no longer an annual practice known and recognized by the masses of working-class attendees imagined by Bakhtin.¹⁴³ It seems that once invoked, the inversion of social hierarchies he imagined made possible by these ritual events might still be taking place amid EDM communities. However, to allow these sorts of inversions to influence the outside world, the reach of carnivalesque rhetorics would have to grow much larger than even the massive audience I had the privilege of studying with. Hundreds of thousands of individuals attending EDM festivals is a measurable start to spreading these messages. Moreover, their performances demonstrate the creativity, imagination, ingenuity, and resources needed to continue to strive for gendered and sexual equity.

CHAPTER THREE

WHITE SUPREMACY, HETERONORMATIVITY, CAPITALISM, AND PATRIARCHY: THE LIMITS OF EDM FOR INTERSECTIONAL FEMINIST PERFORMANCE

Insomniac was printed on everything. “But this was supposed to be a Live Nation production?” I wondered. I soon found out the two often collaborated to put on festivals. Something about the corporate branding shook me out of my romantic stupor and made me feel the heat of the day on my skin. I was less distracted by my joy and able to recall the myriad of white cis men I had seen in DJs booths, the hundreds of dollars I had spent to be there, and the board room of pale individuals my dollars were helping to keep in privilege. (Hard Summer, 2021)

It would be forgivable to think that a musical community invested in unity and respect across individual and cultural differences would sustain a global industry with similar politics. Unfortunately, industry press and participant observations reveal that the new possibilities for performing gender and sexuality created by EDM have not trickled up to the managing class. Instead, the global industrial practices that make EDM a multibillion-dollar industry follow familiar norms of white supremacy, heteronormativity, capitalism, and patriarchy. These industrial practices are perceptible but non-dominant during festival experiences. In this chapter, I use industry trade articles to describe the corporate practices of EDM organizations and their associates. I supplement these articles with my firsthand experience of echoes of oppressive ideologies in the festival atmosphere. The evidence I provide of oppressive ideologies breaking through the rhetorical barriers of the EDM fantasy, what I term inside/outside, rhetorical/cultural

leakage, suggests serious limitations within EDM for rhetorically performing equitable representations of gender and sexuality.

In this chapter, I explore the ways white supremacy is evident within the EDM industry. I support my claim by using trade articles and my firsthand experience to describe how white men hold EDM's most esteemed industry positions. I show that the EDM industry reflects a racist hierarchy characterized by anti-Blackness, from executives to celebrity DJs. Next, I link racism in EDM to the abuse of desert locations and to racist labor practices. I then discuss how executives are predominantly heterosexual men with a strong record of homophobic activities. I follow that with a brief but consequential analysis of one of the few times heteronormativity became apparent within the fantasy experience. I then focus on how deeply engrained capitalism is within EDM and how the rave fantasy is ill-equipped to facilitate feminist critiques of the intersection of political economy and gender equity. Finally, I show how leadership within EDM has committed sexist harassment and sometimes assaults against women. Patriarchal ideologies help shape EDM festivals' structure and create a context where gossip as a rhetorical method arises as common practice for feminine performing community members. I maintain that the disorienting and fantastic rhetoric I described in the previous chapter backgrounds many of the messages I am about to analyze. Nevertheless, their clear presence even within an otherwise overwhelming rhetorical environment shows the power of the dominant ideologies of the outside world and the difficulty of overcoming them. This is especially true of white supremacy.

Intersectional feminist rhetoricians argue that rhetorical analyses of gender that do not consider the politics of race are inherently incomplete and that a rhetorical canon missing the perspectives of Black women and women of color protects white supremacy in higher education and rhetorical studies.¹⁴⁴ These scholars have enriched rhetorical theory by developing a critical

vocabulary that includes analytic concepts like overlapping/interlocking oppressions, the double-bind, and Borderlands. Each of these concepts helps scholars understand how Black women and women of color experience unique forms of sexism. In the words of Kimberlé Crenshaw, these thinkers insisted on the impossibility of being *either* Black *or* a woman.¹⁴⁵ They offered their lived experiences as proof of the intersectional experience of identity and revealed how public discourse in many forms doubly victimized persons living at the intersections of multiple marginalized identities. Gender and race compound in EDM industrial practices and echo through the festival grounds.

Time and again, major industry players in the festival business have committed acts of overt and material racism. For example, when Live Nation fired Candace Newman in 2020, they also fired their only Black female executive. Newman sued the company for racial discrimination and eventually settled out of court for an undisclosed amount. Live Nation claimed that Newman was still an employee and that she was simply furloughed because of the Covid-19 pandemic.¹⁴⁶ Their logic does not answer why Newman, an eleven-year employee, was on the front line for furloughs before every one of her white male peers. Furthermore, Insomniac frequently uses desert settings for their massive events, leaving the primarily low-income people of color who live in the surrounding areas to deal with intense sound leakage that can be as severe as sonic torture.¹⁴⁷ DJ E-Clypse explains the white supremacist culture in EDM industries, noting that "Unlike hip-hop, Black artists in dance culture have yet to emerge from those beginnings. We do not have Black owners of distribution, management or booking agencies, or major media platforms in dance music. Dance culture has not seen the accession of artists to executive status as it has in hip-hop with the likes of Jay-Z, Dr. Dre, Diddy."¹⁴⁸ DJs also explicitly perpetuate white supremacy. DJ E-Clypse lamented the lack of allyship with white DJs too invested in the

systems that continued to grant them the highest paycheck in the industry.¹⁴⁹ In a bid for DJ Mag's top one hundred competition, French DJ Jay Style donned blackface, claimed to be "music's slave," and affirmed that he "love[d]" it.¹⁵⁰ Other Black dance artists like DJ Sliink and music critics like André Wheeler object to the conversion of African American cultural expression into an industry that primarily benefits white executives and performance artists.¹⁵¹ At the same time that many industry executives and performance artists uphold systems of white supremacy, they reinforce a particular heterosexist and homophobic capitalist patriarchy.

Evidence from my participant observations reinforced claims that the EDM industry supports white supremacy. For instance, the incredibly diverse audiences of EDM festivals are not represented by the racial demographics of the genre's most popular DJs. Fans center their racial and ethnic identities within their communal performances of rave identity. EDM audiences represent their racial and ethnic diversity by flying various national flags at main stage performances. This was especially true at Nocturnal Wonderland, where I noted, "I recognize Mexican flags, German symbols, Hmong art, and American pop-culture references dotting the sky in front of the festival's main stage." Later, at Nocturnal Wonderland, which differed from the rest of the festivals in that it was an overnight camping festival, I saw even more diverse representations cultural diversity in flags. I remarked in my notes,

"I think I can read Tagalog on that flag, and that looks to be Farci on another...is that a Fresno State emblem?" I thought to myself. Something about the emblem of the Californian Republic combined with the Mexican flag made me homesick and proud. With a few notable exceptions like the billing of Manilla-Killa (a reference to the DJ's Filipino heritage), the absence of racially diverse DJs stood stark

against an audience for whom racial diversity was a central component of community values. (Beyond Wonderland, 2021)

White men's prominence amid the ranks of EDM's highest-paid DJs mimics the politics of white supremacy that have characterized American public discourse since the first days of colonization. It reinforces ideas about the exceptionalism of a "few great speakers" by playing off the hierarchy between DJs and audiences.¹⁵² This maintained hierarchy points to some of the limits of carnival performance and EDM more broadly for the performance of intersectional feminism. Intersectional feminism insists on being conscious of the politics of race as they compound with social expectations around gender and sexuality. So long as the industry's highest-paid DJs remain predominantly white and male, EDM falls short of enacting respect for the racial diversity of ravers. Alternatively, as Bakhtin's critics might have rightly pointed out, when the carnival is over, the systems of power that sanctioned the experience in the first place remain largely intact.

Another act of white supremacy that echoes in the rhetorical performances of EDM communities involves the use and abuse of desert locations for festival gatherings. Each of the festivals I attended occurred in San Bernardino, California, a notably low-income, low precipitation location adjacent to the Mojave Desert.¹⁵³ San Bernardino's residents are primarily people of color, especially Mexican Americans and first-generation immigrants.¹⁵⁴ Empowered groups in the United States have a long tradition of stealing or otherwise dishonestly obtaining lands from the Indigenous peoples of the Americas and misusing them to the point of ecological turmoil.¹⁵⁵ EDM festivals are yet another example of such a trend. I reflected on this trend at the end of a night of field observations at HARD Summer. I can still hear the gasp in my reaction to festies leaning against temporary fences surrounded by "trash in every corner so thick I can't see

the ground." Despite what appeared like the best intentions for planners and some attendees, the dozens of trash bins that dotted the grounds frequently overflowed before the end of the evening. But it was not just trash. In fact, at every single festival, there was clear evidence of seepage and runoff from restroom areas. At Nocturnal Wonderland, my fellow campers and I had to make a rule never to wear our rave shoes inside the tent where we slept. When I asked why I was met with a chorus of voices that answered in one phrase "Porta Potties!"

Intersectional feminists work from an assumption that the body and the land it inhabits are deeply connected.¹⁵⁶ Various strands of eco-feminism began to pop up in U.S. American discourse in the 1970s and 80s.¹⁵⁷ Since then, ecofeminists have rallied against pollution, forest and other habitat degradation, colonial land theft, the meat industry, and the energy industry.¹⁵⁸ Ecofeminists are diverse, but generally agree that environmental violence is yet another path intersecting with the lives of multiply marginalized women and their allies and reinforcing their social subordination. From an ecofeminist perspective, environmental violence aids gendered injustice in several forms. The theft of land from Indigenous communities is a part of the larger genocide committed by the US government against Native people, especially women and children.¹⁵⁹ The poisoning of soil by big business, especially the energy industries, causes deadly cancers that concentrate in women's breasts and can lead to infertility or amputation.¹⁶⁰ Ecofeminists from several cultural traditions connect the material chemistry of the earth to concepts of maternity, and therefore interpret apathy over her stewardship offensive, and attacks on her grounds acts of violent misogyny.¹⁶¹

Human waste and trash littering the ground are only two of the significant ecological concerns brought to mind by EDM festivals. Sonic leakage, carbon emissions, and erosion should all concern planners, as tens of thousands of people gathered in one place for loud

concerts will disturb the balance of local ecological and social environments. Therefore, violence against one is violence against the other. The degradation of the outdoor spaces where these events occur is apparent to the naked eye. It symbolically represents the material degradation that white supremacist colonial thinking has committed against cultures and landscapes in the Americas. It is yet another example of an industry run by and for the profit of white men, invading spaces inhabited by marginalized communities and using up their resources until the local environment is no longer capable of sustaining human life or society. It is no coincidence that the Southern California desert is home to multiple superfund sites.¹⁶² The hot arid climate makes for hard living and thus cheap rent.¹⁶³ As one of the few affordable places left to live in California, it has represented a place where Mexican Americans can make themselves a home in a homeland stolen from them.¹⁶⁴ Unfortunately, it also represents a vulnerable region, where the rhetoric of white supremacy drips quietly into a scene otherwise amenable to the feminist sensibilities of environmentalism.

The last example of the echoes of white supremacy I will discuss caught up to me on the last night of Nocturnal Wonderland. I had stayed to survey the grounds when all the lights had gone up, and most of the partygoers had left.

A group of friends asked me to take their photo. They were beaming with joy. They wore the typical raver uniforms. At least one could be called a wook. All wore layers and layers of kandi. I snapped their photo, and they thanked me profusely. I was shocked by the empty space behind me when I turned around. All that was left was the waste on the ground. There were broken glow sticks, little bags that likely held drugs, and wrappers of all sorts. I was so engrossed in the trash that I nearly stumbled over a small dustpan at my feet. I looked up and was

greeted by a woman's smile. She was probably just over five feet tall. She greeted me in broken English "compromiso," a term I knew to mean "excuse me," in Mexican American dialectics of Spanish. Her smile struck me. The party was over. Her dustpan was massively undersized for the task at hand, and there she was to clean it all up. (Nocturnal Wonderland, 2021)

The juxtaposition of the woman I described above, the party I had just photographed, and the carnivalesque festival that had just vanished from behind me turned my attention to labor politics within EDM industries and community. Not only were the highest-paid and most praised performers primarily cisgender white men but the lowest-paid positions were also staffed primarily by people of color. EDM festivals require vast amounts of labor. Feminist rhetoricians have documented the multiple oppressions women face in the workplace and how those oppressions are compounded by race.¹⁶⁵ I also observed women of color disproportionately working in EDM's less glamorous hospitality side, while white women who worked at festivals occupied most paid performer positions.¹⁶⁶ The gendered-racial hierarchy in EDM labor was evident at each festival. I noted women working in food stands, grounds crew, bathroom attendants, and the like. However, white supremacy was highlighted for me in these penultimate moments of my festival observations. I stood there in the depths of the festival grounds where, just moments before, the excruciatingly loud speakers and the manically excited crowd had convinced me that just about anything was possible. It all evaporated in what seemed like a blink of an eye, and what was left to see was the mess we had made and the multiply marginalized woman left to clean it up. In other words, when the community performances of EDM festivals come apart, the white supremacist discourse that oppresses women of color is laid bare. Each of these discourses is further compounded by heteronormativity.

Intersectional feminists align their interests with pro LGBTQ+ movements and thinkers.¹⁶⁷ Rhetoric scholars who blend queer and feminist theories are interested in how social discourses normalize specific performed identities within societies and subordinate others under the ideological guidance of patriarchy. They recognize that both sexism and heteronormativity employ logics that subordinate women and otherwise feminized identities to masculine ones within societies. Social rituals related to sexuality are of particular importance to queer-feminist scholars. Examples include marriage and other coupling ceremonies, participation in nightlife, and maternity and parenting.¹⁶⁸ The performance of nightlife participation and maternity is of particular importance to this manuscript. As a site where the two converge, as I have intimately detailed in previous chapters, festivals represent a rhetorical experience wherein queer and feminist performances become possible for audiences. Subsequently, I was shocked to find that in a space that feels so queer-friendly and gender-inclusive, I could still sense the violent rhetorics of heteronormativity common just outside the festival gates.

EDM executives and artists have engaged in anti-gay discourse to the detriment of working-class individuals, people of color, women, and LGBTQIA+ persons. Zel McCarthy argues that the EDM industry caters to an imagined dominant audience member they nickname “The EDM Bro.”¹⁶⁹ McCarthy shows how industry gatekeepers keep queer persons out of the EDM spotlight by prioritizing artists who appeal to “EDM Bros” on important platforms like Spotify.¹⁷⁰ One of the most prominent DJs in EDM, Deadmau5, closed his Twitch account after calling his video game opponent “f*cking c*ck-sucking stream sniper f*g.”¹⁷¹ Deadmau5, otherwise known as Joel Zimmerman, defended his words at first, frantically demanding that anyone present at the time would have understood that his comments were not homophobic. He contended that he was simply using slang to call a player out for being an “asshat.”

Zimmerman did not seem to realize that his easy association between “fags” and “asshats” was the problem in the first place. Deadmau5 did not back down until being confronted by thousands of fans. Unfortunately, EDM fans had little to be surprised about, as the artist had previously made public homophobic comments with little consequence to his status in the EDM industry.¹⁷²

The presence of heteronormative rhetoric was also evident during my field observations. It was less obvious than many of the other oppressive discourses I note. My location, social and physical, within the participatory audience likely skewed my vision toward the more sexually inclusive politics of the EDM community than the dominant forms of heteronormativity attempting to make their way inside. Nevertheless, a critical engagement with another festie who avowed a gay male identity focused my attention on how ravers perform imperfect politics. I maintain that most ravers are genuinely queer-friendly and socially progressive thinkers. I find it necessary to note that they are still humans, capable of using imperfect rhetorical tactics in the context of an overall queer-positive experience, as evidenced in the following fieldnote.

I admired his outfit. It was a two-piece matching set of bright pink floral prints. It looked simultaneously festive and comfortable, and I grew jealous. He crossed his legs, looked at me, and joked about accidentally flashing the crowd. I quipped that he would find himself in good company on that day. He giggled and shot back, "I am not a trashy whore." (Hard Summer, 2021)

My interlocutor's words recognized that despite his performing masculinity, the queer interpretation of masculinity he wore that day rendered him vulnerable to the same body policing used against women. He was pushing gender norms, timidly crossing his legs, proudly wearing

pink, yet he too recognized the danger of taking the action too far, i.e., being presumed "trashy." To be trash is to be less than human and live in precarity.

Heteronormative interruptions into the festival fantasyland were admittedly less noticeable than capitalist, patriarchal, sexist, and white supremacist discourse. In part, this could be attributed to recent trends in the music industry to elevate gay white men into positions of privilege.¹⁷³ My location may have also skewed my vantage as a participant researcher. It might also be because some artists who perform at festivals are openly queer. Still, catching the phrase "that's gay" muttered by a stranger amongst a crowd or "fucking fag!" exchanged with a laugh between two men in pasties was not unheard of. However, they were far from dominant discursive practices amongst ravers. More often, ravers decked themselves out in sex-positive kandi, dressed in costumes that referenced sexual subcultures, and decorated themselves in neon and rainbow costumes. However, the carnivalesque rhetoric of festivals remains limited by the capitalist contexts from which they emerge.

For Bakhtin, the carnival was a significant social practice because it maintained economic systems within societies. The carnival provided a material outlet for the working classes to espouse their disavowal of their serfdom and act out what life would be like should they gain equity within their communities.¹⁷⁴ Bakhtin argues that this bit of theatre is equally fantasy and reality for participants. As real as the performances are for participant audiences, they remain temporary. Whether the fleeting nature of carnival's potential is symbolized in the 200+ year dominance of the feudal system in Medieval Europe or the billionaire status of major EDM executives makes little difference to the economic implications. The dominant system remains intact and largely unquestioned by the very groups it subordinates. As many feminist

rhetoricians have pointed out, the maintenance of capitalism has historically worked to the disadvantage of multiply marginalized women.¹⁷⁵

Modern mass festivals are a part of a long-standing tradition that scholars and trade writers link to the counterculture ideology of the 1960s.¹⁷⁶ The evident contradiction between billion-dollar corporations and countercultural concertgoers creates problems for promoters. Chris Anderton argues that the "countercultural carnivalesque," or the spectacle like performance of hippie ethics such as anti-capitalism, environmentalism, and "broadly alternative or New Age beliefs," requires a "fine balance" between commercialization and countercultural presentation on the part of concert promoters hoping to appeal to contemporary audiences. My time in the field produced ample evidence of rhetorical performances related to the hippie lifestyle. Ravers wore tie-dye, traveled in VW buses, and practiced public expressions of sexuality that would have been affirmed by the "free love" ethos that inspired hippies.¹⁷⁷ On the other hand, ravers display a relative disregard for the anti-capitalist sensibilities of countercultural ideologies.

Ravers do not seem to mind the dominance of Live Nation and Insomniac in the EDM industry. Every event I attended was sponsored in some way by both or either entity. Hard Summer was the only festival I attended that was purported to be primarily a Live Nation production. However, Live Nation contracted with several third-party vendors. These details might not seem glaring to the average festival attendee, but as I approached merchandise booths and food vendors, I looked for logos and branding on the work clothes. If there were none, I looked for logos and branding on the tents they worked in or merchandise they sold. All vendors were third-party contractors arranged by Live Nation and or Insomniac. This was true across each festival nearly without exception. These two multi-billion-dollar organizations monopolize most of the profits generated by EDM.¹⁷⁸ The role of these two corporations as significant

sponsors and beneficiaries of EDM culture is both prominent and repetitive. Their industrial authority is clearly on display throughout the festival grounds. Live Nation and Insomniac's branding was visible on and around hospitality booths, purchasable merchandise, ravers' fits, handbills, fencing, and other infrastructure. However, the media entities responsible for putting together and profiting from shows did not surface as prominent topics of public discussion amongst ravers.

There are many possible reasons that critical industrial analysis of media entities evades festival experiences. The disorienting nature of loud music and the affective experience audiences have with music present complications for deep critical engagement, including the ability to consider and discuss politics and power within communities.¹⁷⁹ It may also be that the absence of a better option renders ravers apathetic to feminist concerns about capitalism. Regardless, the economic impacts of the EDM industry remain largely uninterrogated by the community during the festival experience. This was represented by ravers embracing the companies in their fits, purchasing merchandise with the Live Nation and EDM logos, and dispersing pro Live Nation and Insomniac media via their online and offline social networks. I recall in my fieldnotes:

A new friend bought a 'HARD' flag and wrapped it around her shoulders. It was black with neon yellow and green. We walked across a hot pavilion and were stopped by a media team wearing polo shirts. I watched as they photographed her skipping across the pavement, beaming from ear to ear. They told us to watch Hard Summer's Instagram page for the photos. They never materialized, but something about this pair's official-looking polos helps me notice the Insomniac

logo printed boldly beneath the bright pink and green 'HARD.' (Hard Summer, 2021)

Bakhtin was keen on the study of political economy from a cultural-performative perspective.¹⁸⁰ In his theorizations, communities would have been familiar with the traditions of carnival, but they would also have understood the performance's critical implications. That is, communities would come together in a festive celebration of the inversion of hierarchies with the understanding that the performances they gave could speak to the concerns of the working class and their critiques of the ruling. Chris Anderton continues with a similar assumption in his industrial analysis of contemporary festivals like Glastonbury.¹⁸¹ Anderton argues that the counterculture audiences of the 1960s influence concertgoers in the 21st century. Consequently, he believes that corporate sponsors engage in a corporate carnivalesque, where companies style themselves as benevolent lords aligned with the ideas of progressivism and the political left.

I extend Anderton's argument by showing how performances of gender and sexuality are limited by the EDM community's communal acceptance of capitalist industrial practices. EDM industry giants fly around the world in private jets and sail the seas in luxury yachts.¹⁸² They profit from taking advantage of low-income landscapes and regularly committing gendered and sexual violence against women and LGBTQ communities. Nevertheless, during my festival experiences, I had little interaction with community discourses critical of capitalist organizations or the patriarchal systems that uphold them. This means that EDM audiences counter Anderton's point by celebrating their corporate sponsors. Whereas Anderton was interested in corporate sponsors that had little to do with live music like Pepsi and Budweiser, ravers seem apathetic if not slightly positively oriented toward organizations like Live Nation and Insomniac. They perform this by purchasing merchandise, posing with it, and spreading the Live Nation and

Insomniac brands. They do all of this even after handing over hundreds of dollars for a weekend of concerts.

The average ticket cost for the three festivals I attended was nearly two hundred dollars. The high ticket prices are actually affordable relative to more prominent festivals like Coachella, South by Southwest, or Burning Man. High ticket prices are also in line with the rise of concert tickets across the live music industry, but especially among those tickets that partner with Ticketmaster.¹⁸³ Ticketmaster is also known under its parent company's name, Liberty Media, which also owns Live Nation.¹⁸⁴ Over the past thirty years, concert ticket prices have risen exponentially, with more and more profit going to third-party tickets (almost exclusively Ticketmaster in the US) and less going to performers and venues.¹⁸⁵ Because the corporate structures of Ticketmaster and Live Nation are one and the same, it makes sense that the leadership at each company has committed nearly equally egregious acts of sexism, racism, and homophobia. Still, ravers have little choice but to pay into these cooperate systems if they want to participate in the EDM community. However, they do have some agency over how they engage with the modern-day lords of merriment. In these instances, my co-participants were apathetic about engaging in critical anti-capitalist discourse. However, ravers' financial support of the patriarchal EDM industry does not stop after purchasing their tickets. The overall cost ravers are willing to pay to achieve "good vibes" demonstrates the limits of intersectional feminist expression within EDM festival communities.

There is a high overall cost to be associated with the EDM community. Not only must an attendee purchase their ticket, but they also often have to travel, meaning they must pay for room and board. Most festivals do not allow for multiple entrances during the day, nor would the massive size of most festival grounds make them feasible. Food and other sustenance must be

purchased at high prices similar to what one would expect to overpay for concessions at any arena or sporting event. Most ravers also invest lots of money into their fits. I noted to myself while planning for Beyond Wonderland: “I hope my research funding comes in soon. I’ve had to fill out many extra forms to get funding to travel amid the pandemic. I’ll need the money to eat while I’m in California.” Even on my more desperate days, I made sure to pull enough money together to create a new look for each day of fieldwork and to bring home an artifact of merchandise for my collection. These expenses are specific to the festival experience and do not consider the cost of international travel, music subscriptions, etc. Even so, they present thousands of dollars sunk into EDM culture. The high overall cost of attending a festival is yet another limit of EDM as a tool for feminist progress.

Capitalist and patriarchal oppression often work in conjunction.¹⁸⁶ This dynamic is evident within the EDM community. In previous chapters, I referenced the difficulty of invoking extraordinary situations where new ideas about gender and sexuality become possible. The goal of gender equity becomes less attainable as the price tag rises. My participant observations prove that EDM audiences are massive. They contain a high concentration of community members willing to rethink and re-perform what it means to live in and through one’s gender and sexuality. Even though the labor of attending a festival is sizable, ravers demonstrate their willingness to perform this labor in the tens of thousands. However, even an audience as willing as this one is limited by their financial resources. In the case of festivals, EDM remains a pay-to-play community. In a consumer world characterized by racist, sexist, and heteronormative economic systems, this means that people living in marginalized identities are least likely to have access to the fantasy. Those low-income individuals who do put the money together to participate (and my story was not uncommon in the community) pay a higher proportional price

to perform their unique imaginations of gender and identity than their white-hetero-male counterparts.

Capitalism contributes to many forms of sexism within EDM communities. This is evidenced in how critical discourses about capitalism are avoided during festivals. In other words, ravers tend to background discussions about the high cost of tickets and the overall cost of an EDM experience. These last two examples of capitalist echoes within EDM communities reveal how, even if ravers do not directly engage topics about political economy at festivals, the profit they funnel toward industry leaders leaves proven misogynists and bigots in elevated positions of power. So long as the implicit acceptance of multibillion-dollar organizations dominating EDM continues, the performed messages of inclusiveness on the part of EDM audiences will be countered by the material and symbolic support of ravers' money. Festies may challenge norms related to nurturing, sexual expression, and gendered identity. Still, industry executives often do not, revealing that the rhetoric of PLUR fails to displace some of the systemic causes of gendered inequality, including global free-market capitalism and its influence on the music industry. To conclude my analysis, I now discuss how EDM festivals are limited in their ability to reform patriarchal social structures.

The two primary ways that festival experiences demonstrate the presence of patriarchy are in the agenda-setting practices of talent acquisition teams and the gossip techniques used by ravers as rhetorical strategy. Agenda setting involves decision-making about the content conveyed to audiences.¹⁸⁷ Talent acquisition is the industrial department most responsible for agenda-setting in the EDM world. These corporate sectors are responsible for working with artists and their representation to secure the festivals' primary selling point, the live performance of famous EDM DJs. Pamela VanHaitsma argues that gossip emerges as a rhetorical strategy

within communities where marginalized voices might otherwise be silenced or forgotten.¹⁸⁸

VanHaitsma theorizes how queer and feminist communities use gossip as a rhetorical strategy to communicate essential matters for surviving in oppressive contexts. This section shows how the EDM industry press and my participant observation revealed the influence of sexist agenda setting and feminist gossip in EDM communities.

The talent acquisition practices that score EDM festivals reflect the misogyny that surrounds the community. Take, for example, a former staple of the EDM festival circuit, Bassnectar. Lorin Ashton, better known as Bassnectar, was also the owner and executive producer of Bassnectar Touring. Ashton has been charged with statutory rape, sex trafficking, and producing child pornography.¹⁸⁹ Eventually, Ashton stepped back from the EDM industry, but only after enjoying decades as an industry darling and top billing at numerous EDM festivals.¹⁹⁰ Bassnectar's popularity as an EDM performer reveals how extreme cases of misogyny and well-known sexual violence do not necessarily prevent famous artists from enjoying acclaim. This could be because the critical discourses of marginalized communities are frequently silenced and consequently absent from historical records. However, my participant observation showed that women within EDM communities used gossip to document cases of sexual violence and to disseminate vital survival information to their peers. At Beyond Wonderland I wrote the following:

My new friend leaned in a whispered that she would rather be sitting in front of this small stage than watching Diplo. I grow curious and ask why Diplo specifically. They rolled their eyes. Realizing my inquiry was genuine and not sarcastic, they pointed out that Diplo is well known for grooming young women to engage in sexual acts with him and his peers. My companion explains that several

prominent white male DJs are known for doing just the same thing and that it is common gossip which DJs are safe to engage with and which are known as sexual predators. (Beyond Wonderland, 2021)

My shock at my companion's words that evening reflected my perception of a contradiction between their enthusiastic participation in the festival and genuine concern and frustration with the culture of sexual assault demonstrated by EDM DJs. The contradiction was characterized by femme performing attendees having little choice but to subject their bodies to sexist gaze and even assault to participate in a culture sustained by toxic masculinity and rape discourses and built to put ravers into close contact with one another. In previous chapters, I have discussed how the lack of physical distance between ravers induces creative reinterpretations of space. What I recognized in researching trends in the EDM industry and in listening to the strategic gossip between femme performing ravers was that they were willing to sit in their contradictions. They saw, at times, the insufficiency of their theatre but proceeded anyway.

My new friend leaned into the contradiction of their presence at the event. My companion may have recognized the contradiction themselves, but they remained nonplussed. Their nonverbal actions and whispered reassurances clued me into gossip-based rhetoric of protection employed by EDM communities against sexual violence. Their presence indicated that this reassurance was enough for them to feel comfortable basking in the joy of the carnival despite the podium given to known sex offenders. The fantastic rhetoric of the festival allows attendees to disengage from critical interpretations of the EDM experience. However, they went out of their way to warn me about some of the misogynistic systems at work in the fantasy. They enjoyed the experience even while on guard against assault.

The preceding vignette shows my partial disengagement with the patriarchal and heterosexist politics that can permeate EDM communities. I know of the prominence of sexual assault at these events in an academic and embodied sense. I struggled while planning this project with the morality of conducting research that it is possible others would want to emulate when I knew there was a strong chance I would experience sexual assault during the research process. But to be shocked at the possibility that I might be groped in a crowd would have neglected every experience I have had as a woman in a crowd....in the workplace.... or in public at all. I was eager to continue my research despite my predictions. My research questions were well suited to the setting, but I also knew I would have fun! I know that I will also have fun at every concert I attend in the future, even though I remain positive that my feminine performing body will be groped again and again. In this case, I am like my companion that evening and so many other femme performing ravers and concertgoers. I am encouraged to trade the price of my bodily autonomy to perform alongside the musical communities that contribute to core aspects of my identity. Thus, the echoes of rape culture scream loud enough to permeate the festival experience in the deepest parts of the fantasy. They are, however, little match for the overwhelming nature of carnival. Critical engagement with heterosexism remains backgrounded to performing to joyous politics of PLUR.

This was not the only occasion during which I witnessed women using gossip to spread messages about safety within a sexist environment that also put bodies into close contact with one another. On another occasion, I walked through one of the most crowded locations on the festival grounds. Several of us grabbed onto one another's hands as we weaved through the crowds of strangers to stick together. When we came to a clearing, and most of us dropped our hands back to our sides, one of the newest additions to the group (everyone had just met that

day) held onto me. In this context, I thought little of the move. Hand holding as a representation of unity is a necessary tradition in PLUR culture. But when my new acquaintance repeated this behavior after the group had physically come together and apart several times, the other feminine identifying folx in the company began to gossip with me. They used coded and hidden messages to inquire about my safety and taught me codes for asking for help if I decided I needed it:

Tiger went off to the porta-potties. My girlfriends nearly whipped around to scream-whisper “ARE YOU OK?!” “If not say so!” “Just squeeze my hand harder if you get uncomfortable!” (Beyond Wonderland, 2021)

My girlfriends' concern for my well-being, despite us knowing one another for mere hours, demonstrates their familiarity with rave culture and the potential for assault created therein. Even though the physical activity that Tiger and I demonstrated was not uncommon amid ravers and certainly not one that they would consider promiscuous, they waited until the masculine presence had momentarily left our group and then quickly inquired about whether I was safe. They showed little concern for whether I might be taking advantage of Tiger. The placement of their concern and gossip-based methods showed their awareness of the power dynamics associated with the sexual violence that permeates the fantasy. A large portion of sexual violence is committed by men against women. My friends' concern was well placed, and I did not love holding onto Tiger's sweaty palm, but it was not the thing I was paying most attention to then. It was the improvised negotiations that femme performing ravers engaged as a group of perceived allies once the only masculine identifying person in the group had left. I was stunned by how femme ravers acted as though they had an unspoken understanding that it was their responsibility to protect each other against would-be rapists and harassers. I was amazed by their creativity and stunned by their willingness to accept misogyny within *their* fantasy. However, festies did not

simply accept sexism. They negotiated how to exist relatively safely in a world where sexism seems to always exist despite their best performative efforts.

When I assured them I was fine, they switched to judging his character. “We think he is harmless.” “Yeah, just a little too forward” “He does not mean anything by it, but we can say something if you want us to!” We agreed not to ditch him but decided that if any of us wanted to, we could announce we were not feeling good and the rest would follow outside the festival gates until we were safely back at our hotel. (Beyond Wonderland, 2021)

The women in my group at this festival demonstrated the strategic negotiations women make in their everyday lives in the outside world. They wanted to be present at the festival, to perform PLUR and feminine rave identities. They were so invested in the experience that they paid hundreds of dollars to get inside the gates despite their familiarity with the sexism they may be subject to. Rather than boycotting EDM, the women triaged the situation, first affirming me as femme performing raver and then making quick and quiet decisions about how to react. The lure of EDM may be so strong as to encourage women to trade their safety for the ability to participate. However, I contend that it is more likely that femme performing ravers also experience sexual harassment and assault in the outside world, making the safety in the rave world relatively comparable to that of everyday life. At least in the festival context, most who enter are fully aware of the close quarters they will encounter. Purchasing a ticket and willingly walking into close contact with one another represents a good deal more agency than women are often provided over their own bodies. In EDM, respect for an individual’s bodily autonomy is at least a prominent public discourse within the community, representing a possible positive departure from the sexist politics of the outside world.

To conclude this chapter, I return to my overarching argument that there are limitations to using EDM to create new and more equitable possibilities for performing gender and sexuality. I have defined the aspiration for gender equity to this point as an intersectional feminist one. I have shown that the EDM industry and the communities that support it often fall short of the radical politics of intersectional feminism. To summarize, an intersectional feminist performance is anti-racist, queer-positive, critical of class politics, and guided by the historical dominance of patriarchy and the desire to displace it. This is not to say that the promise of EDM for performing more equitable ideas around gender should be discarded. Instead, it should be treated as another method of performing what Roxanne Gay calls "Bad Feminism."¹⁹¹ In other words, the politics of EDM may be imperfect, but that does not mean that the contributions of feminist ravers are inconsequential. Festies' ability to also be feminist is limited but nonetheless real.

Women of color theorized the concept of intersectional feminism.¹⁹² Feminist thinking that does not recognize the foundational union between gender and race is incomplete. Even though EDM communities display extensive ethnic and cultural identities, the racial makeup of the most influential individuals in the EDM community is visible in corporate structures and festival staging that place white men in a position of greater prominence than the rest of the community. Accepting the politics of EDM festivals as they are requires accepting the dominance of white men in positions of power. Ravers might contest this assumption, as my evidence shows they are very proud of their racial and ethnic backgrounds. Regardless, their paychecks and presence contribute to keeping these racist hierarchies in place. Racist hierarchies, on the other hand, compound with anti-gay rhetoric that ruins an otherwise queer-positive atmosphere.

Intersectional feminists illuminate how lesbian feminism was consequential to the second wave and later feminist movements.¹⁹³ Queer acceptance is a well-known predicate of contemporary feminism. Acceptance of one's bodily and sexual autonomy is also necessary to a PLUR ethos. And yet, EDM executives are on record as being anti-gay. This rhetoric is reflected even by queer performing festies. Feminist and queer movements have several shared goals. The two miss rhetorical possibilities when they neglect to collaborate.¹⁹⁴ They also fail to live up to the pursuit of gender justice in a diverse but ever-connected world. Luckily, heteronormativity is not the norm, according to my participant observations. Nevertheless, it is present, as is the poison of free-market capitalism, resistant to concerns about equity or inclusion.

In my festival experiences, the ideology that most directly countered the principles of intersectional feminism was capitalism. From the immense profits made by executives to the blatant environmental degradation caused by the mass gatherings, ravers seemed ready to overlook the gendered politics of capitalism in order to participate in these events. Carnavalesque performers seemed more concerned with maintaining good vibes within the group than protesting the dominance of EDM corporate overlords. The lack of political-economic critique during the festival experience presents serious limitations for performing intersectional feminism as a raver. Feminist rhetoricians have thoroughly documented how free-market capitalism compounds patriarchy to subordinate women and other marginalized identity groups.¹⁹⁵ Ravers pay hundreds of dollars for their entry tickets. They spend just as much for various merchandise and food and drink during the festival experience. These dollars funnel upward, leaving ravers out of pocket and hospitality and service workers, who are primarily women and people of color, underpaid and undervalued. So long as the poorest women remain oppressed by the particular

form of capitalism EDM supports, the festival experience will remain unable to live up to the goal of liberating *all* women, regardless of socioeconomic class.

So, what then can be the use of the EDM festival for feminist expression of gender and sexuality if the experience is so fraught with political minefields? If “the master’s tools will never tear down the master’s house,” how could any avowed feminist hand their money directly into the master’s hands?¹⁹⁶ Social change must often occur under the shadow of compromise and partiality.¹⁹⁷ My research into the dance music industry and experiences as a participant raver allowed me insight into the community's devout performance of peace, love, unity, and respect. It also showed me deep contradictions between the community's avowed ethos and performed politics. The dominance of patriarchy has been so prodigious throughout history that those concerned with gender equity have often only had access to flawed rhetorical strategies and incremental change.

The complexity of patriarchy regularly pushes feminists to recognize and analyze the contradictions they embody. If we did not find ways to work in and through our contradictions, the pool of rhetorical strategies available to feminists would indeed shrink. The intersectional notion that individuals exist at the juncture of several ideological systems that differentially empower and oppress various aspects of our identities guides my optimistic hold-out for dance music. EDM communities have yet to operationalize their privilege to speak fully to the compounding oppression of racism, heteronormativity, capitalism, and patriarchy. However, my participant observation demonstrated various devices that ravers use to partially protest the systems of patriarchy that disturb the peace within communities, diminish the possibility for equitable love and genuine respect across the gender spectrum, and prevent the possibility of unity between diverse activist movements. These methods cannot solve the innumerable social

problems created by patriarchy alone, but they can chip away at its foundations little by little.

The work may be slow-moving, but it is laudable, nonetheless. Therefore, in my final chapter, I recommend performative participant observation as a rhetorical field method for witnessing community performances of rhetorical strategies for social change, even amid the drastic disorientation created by the rhetoric of electronic dance music.

CHAPTER FOUR: PERFORMATIVE PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION- SUGGESTIONS
FOR STUDYING EPHEMERAL RHETORIC *IN SITU*.

They fluttered by faster than I was prepared for. My heart raced as I hurried to jot down some notes on my phone but stumbled over another raver's boot. I wanted to write a reminder to myself to look into the role of fairies and nymphs in medieval folklore. I knew I was more likely to forget the further I got away from where I spotted them. I remembered my IRB protocol. How could I de-identify a life-size dancing glitter fairy? Fortunately, I would never be able to identify them in the first place. There were far too many. (Beyond Wonderland, 2021)

Dancing glitter fairies and sexed-up forest nymphs were common sites at the festivals. EDM festivals facilitate carnivalesque performances, which can be so fantastical that they demonstrate the capacity to disrupt entrenched social norms like gender and sexual inequity. However, the fantastic and ephemeral nature of reimagining gender and sexuality at EDM festivals also demonstrates the difficulty of challenging engrained social patterns. EDM-inspired discourse is constrained by the capitalist motivations of the industries that sustain dance music festivals. These industries are primarily managed by cisgender white heterosexual men who have little buy-in to the radical politics of PLUR beyond their bottom line.

From my participant performance of PLUR as gendered and sexed rhetoric, I arrive at three significant conclusions about the process of studying rhetoric *in situ*. First, performative participant observation is an effective way to study temporary but consequential public communication about social issues, especially relating to feminist and pro LGBTQ+ discourse. Second, engaging in performative participant observation helped me identify and analyze two

ephemeral strategies used by the EDM community: carnival and disorientation. Third, both ephemeral musical strategies helped ravers embody transgressive identities in some situations. However, the potential of EDM is limited by the same status quo ideologies that dominate the outside world: white supremacy, heteronormativity, capitalism, and patriarchy. I begin by arguing that my approach to rhetorical fieldwork allows special access to ephemeral rhetorics.

Performative participant observation is helpful for scholars interested in using rhetorical field methods to understand embodied and ephemeral rhetorics like those created by music. In this chapter, I outline the key components of this methodological approach and reflect on how it promotes diversity in rhetorical criticism. My approach to a performative participant observation focuses on discrete, ephemeral rhetorical performances in which I along with peer audience members, artists, and key industry entities co-create meaning through shared performances. What distinguishes PPO as a rhetorical field method from participant observation as a qualitative method is the distinct perspective and experience of the rhetorical critic. Edwin Black reminds us that each piece of rhetorical criticism is unique because each critic is unique, and unique in their perspective on any one piece of public address.¹⁹⁸ As a feminist critic of musical rhetoric, I focus on co-created performances of the gendered and sexual politics of community that manifest in musical experiences. Performative participant observation allows me to incorporate this notion into a broader framework in which performances are co-created by diverse participants, the critic included. As such, the ephemeral rhetorics PPO can access persist only in whatever form the critic is able and *chooses* to capture, relay, and assess.

I carry out performative participant observation as a rhetorical field method in several steps. First, I develop a research question. Then I turn my focus to my point of analysis or text. As a feminist rhetorician, I am interested in community performances that speak to shared

expectations around gender and sexuality. As a result, the point of my analysis became community performances of gender and sexuality enacted by ravers at EDM festivals. The rhetoric I investigate is complex, momentary, multisensorial, and often nonverbal. My focus as a performative participant observer is on moments when I can witness and be a part of the creation, circulation, and reception of rhetorical performance all at once. This hybrid approach to rhetorical criticism can be as overwhelming as EDM, making proper preparation essential to a successful research trip.

After developing a research question and locating community performances in public that offer an opportunity to participate, I researched the cultural values and traditions associated with my future co-performers. Just like studying text-based rhetorics, studying rhetoric *in situ* requires understanding the contextual setting from which rhetoric arises.¹⁹⁹ Understanding context is doubly important when studying under-represented or marginalized communities.²⁰⁰ Researching the EDM community online and through personal friendships allowed me to plan outfits that helped me blend into crowds, pack appropriate tools for note-taking, and, on more than one occasion, stopped me from making an utter fool out of myself in front of my fellow ravers. Equipped with critical cultural pieces of knowledge, I then performed alongside the community members who developed and disseminated rhetorical messages about gender and sexuality to our peer audiences.

I performed with the community I study as often as possible within my research proposal's timeframe. I attended three music festivals in part because their multi-day format allowed me to conduct dozens of hours of participant observation over three short months. Rhetorical criticism requires a scholar to know the communication that they analyze as intimately as they possibly can.²⁰¹ The deeply affective nature of EDM and musical rhetorics

more broadly can make audience members feel as though they are connected with a rhetorical message after just a few experiences. However, rhetorical scholars know that communication is multifaceted and that every investigation takes a slightly different vantage, yielding unique insights and conclusions. Performing rhetoric with communities yields greater understanding with repetition. Consequently, my project and other ventures into performative participant observation can increase scholars' understanding of rhetorical performances in a short time period, like a dissertation project *and* sustain long research agenda.

During the performance process, I took shorthand field notes designed to help me recall public performances I witnessed that related to my overarching research question: "How do music festivals function as temporary communities that rhetorically construct the performance of gender and sexuality?" Rhetoricians are not as practiced at taking fieldnotes as they are with analyzing archived materials.²⁰² As a rhetorician, I also admit guilt. Some performative experiences will allow for more detailed *in situ* note-taking than others. Pulling out my phone during a kandi exchange, for example, would be considered rude, and attempting to open my notes app in the middle of a mosh pit is simply irresponsible. Still, the more details I was able to write out in shorthand the more descriptive my extended narratives became, ultimately better supporting my analytic conclusions.²⁰³ My note-taking procedure also became more targeted as the process continued.

After each festival, I analyzed my notes for rhetorical themes and strategies that were either recurrent or prominent. Before attending my last EDM festival, I compared themes and strategies from my previous field notes. This allowed me to narrow the set of rhetorical messages I was looking for and focus my notes on emergent theses about the rave community's performance of gender and sexuality. My shift in the notetaking approach minimized the amount

of time I found myself on my phone and increased my ability to simply *be* with my co-performers. Once I finished my last round of festival participation, I reviewed all three sets of field notes for (in)consistencies and patterns, ultimately developing arguments about the embodied, ephemeral, fantastic, and limited rhetorics produced by EDM. I conclude my project by claiming that the embodied and emplaced nature of performative participant observation can enrich rhetorical scholars' understanding of ephemeral rhetorical performances.

The location-based metaphor in the word emplacement is illustrative but not always literal. Rhetorical field methodologists recognize “the field” or emplacement of rhetoric as material and mappable. However, Michael K. Middleton et al. maintain that the field is also “*a community of meaning, a context, and a rhetorical actor.*”²⁰⁴ I use performative participant observation as a research method to emplace myself within festival grounds, among rave communities, in the context of a PLUR-based universe, and within the belly of the raving beast itself. By taking on the role of an EDM character and all their liminal strategies and capabilities, I immerse myself within the conglomerate of other festies, built environments, and cultural expressions that combine to create a dance-music-based rhetoric that is irreducible to the sum of its parts.

The emplaced perspectives made accessible to researchers through rhetorical field methods increase the number and diversity of voices and stories included in the rhetorical studies.²⁰⁵ Several praiseworthy feminist rhetoricians have been hard at work diversifying the Western rhetorical cannon for decades.²⁰⁶ However, the millennia-old practice of ignoring if not outright erasing the voices of women, LGBTQ+ persons, people of color, and the working classes still requires correction. Being present in the field allowed me to hear the crucial gossip raving femmes share with one another. It brought the self-critical moment of a gay Black man

recognizing his implication in patriarchy. Taking my body to the places where the rhetoric that interested me was lived allowed me to engage the experience with all my senses and to hear and be with the quietest audience members who might be otherwise muted by the booming bass sounds around them. In short, participating and performing with the EDM audience allowed me to experience a rhetoric of EDM unavailable on pre-recorded studio albums or even video reproductions. The tens of thousands of persons who participated alongside me *all* contributed to the overwhelming feelings we had together in front of stages. Not only does a performative approach to participant observation offer greater access to a multitude of voices, but it is also helpful for rhetoricians interested in analyzing ephemeral discourses.

Using performative participation observation, I identified two strategies exhibited in the ephemeral musical rhetoric produced at EDM festivals: disorientation and carnival. Ephemeral rhetorics are discourses that are by nature temporary and impossible to reproduce or archive. Musical recording technologies were some of the first inventions of the modern media revolution.²⁰⁷ As a result, albums, lyrics, and even video performances have been available to rhetorical scholars to analyze for the better part of the last century. Rhetorical critics have also recently begun to consider how lived and ephemeral communication influences social norms.²⁰⁸ I study ephemeral rhetorics like those created by musical experiences by combining cultural knowledges of EDM communities and industries with participation among a performative public. Two key examples of the ephemeral rhetorics I describe are disorientation and carnival.

Disorientation is an embodied rhetorical strategy that overwhelms the senses in ways that can disrupt culturally dominant logics, priming audience members' imaginations to conjure new identities and communities. In order for the form of disorientation that I experienced to occur, the simultaneous contributions of musical performers, festival planners, and audience

participants is needed. The population requirement alone is massive, and each experience is so unique that they all but disappear in the moments after the last artist wraps up their sets. Therefore, to understand disorientation as a rhetorical tactic, a scholar should *experience* disorientation as a rhetorical tactic, as it isn't likely to manifest the same way twice.

Carnival itself is also an ephemeral experience. In medieval contexts, serfs would return to toilsome labor with few rewards at the end of festivities. Lords would retain most of the profits sewn from lands gifted to them through hereditary inheritance. A clever jester might have convinced their landlords to change some of their more oppressive ruling practices in the best of scenarios. Even in the Middle Ages, however, Bakhtin suggests these interactions between the ruling class and the laborers that supported them were more about maintaining the status quo of economic politics than benevolence.²⁰⁹ Today, festies trade in their pasties and platform boots to work routine jobs in the service industry, sales, the medical field, education, and academics. As they return to their regular employment, their wages land in the accounts of billionaire playboys with abysmal records of committing acts of white supremacy, heteronormativity, classism, and sexism. Even though disorientation, carnival, and live musical performances create temporary rhetorical performance possibilities for their audiences, this does not mean that they are inconsequential to questions about gender, sexuality, and the lived experience of rhetorical practice.

I reveal how these ephemeral musical rhetorics and other performative elements constituted diverse, transgressive identities. This progressiveness, however, was constrained by the festivals' capitalist imperatives. Transgressive identity performances appeared in wooks, rave moms, and flow artist characters. Wooks who practice flow art combine masculine performances with maternal gestures of care. The availability of the title "rave mom" to any

festie who prioritizes care for others expands ideas about motherhood beyond biological essentialism. However, EDM festivals are big business. The entire industry is hardly more than a monopoly, with a majority of profits funneling upward toward executives who increasingly control more and more of the means of producing a massive live music festival. EDM corporations also continue to sponsor white male DJs with poor records of human decency. Even though participant performers espoused a PLUR ethos based on peace, love, unity, and respect, echoes of white supremacy, heteronormativity, and patriarchy enter the festival experience in DJs discourse, gender binary fits, and sexist comments that float above the crowds. Alas, I conclude that EDM does indeed offer important possibilities for intersectional feminist performances of gender and sexuality, but they can only speak to certain aspects of inequity and therefore are a part of the well-stocked toolbox needed to fight patriarchy.

I arrive at my conclusions by entering scholarly conversations in chapter one about the rhetoric of carnival, particularly around rhetorical strategies that invoke liminality. I review scholarly research on the role of production, artist performance, and participant performance in carnivalesque festivities. I add to communication scholarship and trade industry coverage that focuses on the role of industry planners and famous DJs often to the exclusion of ravers and EDM communities. I argue that rhetorical scholarship with an intersectional feminist focus should consider the co-production of community rhetoric by studying audiences' contributions to carnivalesque performances alongside physical and industrial contributions to the overall message. I then attempt to embody this polysemic approach to analyzing rhetoric in my criticism of community performances of PLUR and other raver politics at several EDM festivals.

In chapter two, I use narrative evidence to describe my participant experiences at three EDM festivals as evidence of community performances of PLUR, the dominant raver ethos. I

describe how fencing works to guide participants through liminal spaces that project them from an outside world deep into a realm of fantasy. Other festival infrastructures like photo-op spaces and main stages pull ravers into a fantastic experience where new performances of gender and sexuality become possible. I show how infrastructure, EDM music, and participant attendees come together to create a disorienting rhetorical experience where the fantastic can be, as it is in the carnival, just as real as it is imagined. I describe feminine performances of hypersexuality, reimagined approaches to consent, and masculine actions associated with care as community performances of transgressive politics of gender and sexuality. Each of these experiences shows that ravers construct their own approach to performing identity within the fantasy of the rave. These social constructions, however, are deeply influenced by the social-historical contexts that surround raves.

In chapter three, I examine the limitations of the EDM festival as intersectional feminist experiences. I describe white supremacy in EDM corporate structures and talent acquisition. I discuss linkages between white supremacy, environmental injustice, and labor exploitation I was witness to within the raver world. I admit that heteronormative discourse from the outside world permeates festival events, despite the pro LGBTQ+ stances strongly associated with a PLUR ethos. I was less surprised to document capitalist ideology among ravers and the corporate structures that make festivals happen. In summation I argue that the leakage of racist, homophobic, and capitalist discourse into festivals ultimately limits the feminist possibilities for performing gender and equality within EDM communities. Even though the ethics of PLUR frequently background oppressive ideological discourses, it does not eliminate them. The EDM festival thusly demonstrates the extreme tactics needed to reshape patriarchal social expectations surrounding the performance of gender and sexuality are necessary to feminist progress, but not

sufficient. In other words, EDM can be a useful tool for intersectional feminists. However, just like any tool for social change, it is most useful when thought of as one of many possible strategies for upending the status quo.

In this chapter, I move from analytic criticism of festival rhetoric to consider the implication of studying performed rhetoric as a participant-observer. I argue that attending and taking the perspective of a participant is especially useful for studying temporary or ephemeral rhetorics that, despite their resistance to documentation, have the capacity to impact massive audiences. I support this argument by pointing to the several public and performative moments during the three EDM festivals I attended that demonstrated intersectional feminist politics but would have been inaccessible had I not been there to participate in them. I support my argument by discussing disorientation and carnivalesque as rhetorical strategies that are best understood in person, and through the body. Finally, I contend that my approach to performative participant observation allows rhetorical critics to access and analyze rhetorical strategies that at times enable the transgression of contemporary patriarchy and at others simply enable contemporary patriarchy. These split results frustrate me, even though I know they are generally the most defensible arguments a rhetorician can make. As a scholar invested in considering the rhetorical body, I now discuss the sometimes-frustrating challenges, happy surprises, and necessary limitations of my dissertation project.

The two biggest challenges I encountered in the field were physical and financial. I knew from the planning stages that my proposal was biting off a bit more than my body might be able to chew. Nevertheless, I did my best to prepare for the punishing sun and extreme cardiac demand of dancing for hours in the middle of the desert in the high summer. At the time, I was an avid hiker, and would often log upwards of six miles at a time on intermediate-difficult

inclines in the Rocky Mountains. I even summited what Coloradoans refer to as a “fourteener”—a summit over fourteen thousand feet. I hiked upwards of two hours at high elevations two-three times a week for months before ever attending a music festival. And I was still underprepared. I documented feeling nauseous, overheated, and uncomfortable after every single day of fieldwork. When an evening of festivities I ended, I found myself hardly able to peel my boots off of the blisters on my feet, let alone immediately transcribe six-eight hours of sloppy fieldnotes into something legible. The summer heat, dusty conditions, expense of refreshments, and high attention level demanded of fieldwork (meaning missed meals) all added difficulty to the research process and greater physical demand on my body. As a result, I suggest that any scholar interested in conducting participatory fieldwork estimate the physical demands that will be put upon their bodies and then double them. Staying hydrated, strong, and comfortable are basic physiological needs that rhetorical scholars must pay greater attention to when they are in the field. The field requires that scholars plan for their embodied needs, as it can be distracting or difficult to leave and re-enter the scene. I also agree we should also care for our bodies whenever we produce scholarship, lest our claims be spurious or ill-informed in the shadow of greater needs. I add that the scholar *in situ* put great care into their physical preparations for fieldwork. If for no other reason than to avoid the refractory period of healing I needed after each venture and which made analytical work inspiringly difficult for days after each festival.

There are also significant financial challenges for a rhetorical scholar *in situ* that we do not always experience to the same extent when analyzing archived discourse. I grant that I chose to study a costly experience, with high ticket prices and associated costs. However, my expenses were no higher than those paid by members of the communities I wanted to perform and

participate with. I also knew that EDM communities engaged in discourse relative to my research question. With the help of departmental support, I was able to defer some of the costs of the research process. However, when I found myself looking and applying for research grants, I was under-practiced in habits familiar to social scientists. Learning from departments and disciplines more versed in grant writing, IRB protocol, and observational methods, in general, can only enrich rhetorical studies. I am not arguing that social science should overshadow or supplant rhetorical studies, only that the institutional knowledges our colleagues have acquired over decades of practice can enrich our skills as researchers. Engaging embodied and *in situ* research often comes with a price tag incomparable to yearly library fees. Acquiring the funding for this process was a significant challenge, as I have usually had free and unfettered access to the music videos and lyrics I have analyzed in the past. Learning the basics about how to apply for research grants and other forms of institutional support was challenging for a student as advanced as I am in my graduate studies. It felt like learning a new language right before trying to graduate. Now that I feel more fluent in these research methods and disciplinary practices, I also feel more equipped for my next ventures into the field and in analyzing rhetoric *in situ*.

Even though I felt I had prepared myself physically and financially for the research process, the extent to which I underestimated my needs took me by surprise. I was also surprised by the way that the PLUR ethos of EDM communities overshadowed theme work written into each festival by producers. When I proposed my research plan, I contemplated how I might design unique outfits for each festival based on the unique theme each was produced around. I showed up at my first festival in a neon fit complete with bright pink fishnet stockings and a tie-dye crop top. I thought I had done well fitting my look to the occasion for an armature. That is until I made it through the festival gates and realized that theme was more like a suggestion from

the producers that ravers took as much or as little inspiration from as they liked. Much more prominent was adherence to rave traditions like hypersexuality and hyper-individual performances of identity. In most performances where audiences became the overwhelming rhetorical force, their commitment to PLUR appeared more fervent than their concern for any pre-planned theme. My false assumptions put the role of audience in EDM festivals into better perspective. There is no denying that corporate entities significantly influence EDM. After concluding this research process, I am pleasantly surprised by the force of EDM audiences, as they represent the possibility of creating worlds anew. Even though ravers' power is limited, their performances of gender and sexuality at festivals offer proof that justice is at least possible, far off as it may be. Perhaps this is why I found myself easily romanced by a rhetorical community I had been skeptical about.

I began my fieldwork more skeptical than hopeful about EDM. The whole thing felt a bit too young, too loud, and a bit too utopian to be anything other than a disappointment. I had spent time around dance communities as a teenager. I had heard their mantras and believed them at the moment but came to dismiss their hopefulness in time. I had investigated the industry politics and pitfalls of performers as a part of my preparation for participant observation. By the end of my second day of fieldwork, I was already looking forward to the next festival. I felt flattered by all the compliments I received about my fit and energized by the deep bass that physically rocked me out of my comfort zone. I found myself failing to document the stench of waste or the degradation of infrastructure and instead focusing on those new friendships and rituals the EDM community seemed ready to offer. The spectacle of the festival prompts critical predispositions to recede in ways that are analogous to the disorienting force of the bass on ravers.

Upon reflection, I realize that it was primarily audiences that influenced me away from skepticism and toward hope for rave-based rhetorics. I had been to massive concerts with deep bass music and had a good time doing so. However, an EDM festival audience is unique in that its members perform the politics of PLUR. It was in the moments when I was gifted kandi, asked for my consent, and cared for by strangers that I became convinced that EDM meant something important to ravers, something that might represent the precursors of social change. In noticing the dominance of the audience participants in EDM, I realized the intersectional feminist potential of the experience. At the nucleus of artists, participants, and industry influence, EDM comes together as a performance that demonstrates the agency of audiences and the power for communities to rework social politics, even if their resources are limited by the very oppressive ideologies they seek to upend.

Much like EDM is limited in its ability to upend patriarchy, this project is limited by the labor that one scholar can commit to a given project and the precarious nature of safety for the participant rhetorician. Dissertations require hundreds of hours of labor in writing alone. Adding fieldwork to the research process added nearly one hundred hours of labor to my timeline. And yet, I continue to believe that the observations I made throughout the three festivals hardly represent the performative rhetorics engaged by ravers. Time is a limitation for most fieldwork.²¹⁰ I propose to answer the time question with a long-term research plan and, when possible, a team approach to research. As I have argued throughout this dissertation, field research is enriched the longer a researcher can spend with their communities. Planning field research with the same communities over a period of years allows scholars to be critical of their claims, engage and extend relevant conversations in their field with lived evidence, and, most importantly, know the community's rhetorical traditions as intimately as possible. I have already

made plans to return to one of the three festivals I participated in during the summer of 2021. This will allow me to build upon the foundational observations I have made about raver rhetoric and investigate new questions about the micro-communities that emerge at each festival and how their unique performances impact the expression of gender and sexuality. Rhetorical scholars might also increase the number of observational and participatory hours in the field by hiring student researchers. This will not always be possible for early-career academics; however, I am happy to report that in the next year, I will have five thousand dollars to dedicate to research development which I intend to pay to students to compensate them for conducting their performative participant observations as a part of their education in rhetorical field methods.

My plans for continuing to use rhetorical field methods and to teach them to a new generation of student-scholars lead me to the most foreboding limitation I encounter as a scholar and educator. I cannot, and no one can guarantee the researcher's safety *in situ*. I documented multiple moments of non-consensual touching during my fieldwork. While I feel only slightly personally phased by the issue, I have a difficult time with the idea of sending students into such fraught situations. My jadedness is not enough to calm my nervousness at the thought of sending students into situations where I have experienced harassment and assault. At the same time, attempting to shield my students from gendered and sexual injustice would require locking them away from most of the world we live in. I go forward resolute in teaching students field methods for participating in and analyzing rhetorical performances. I hope my experiences become yet another tool for intersectional feminists to access as they investigate and consequently remake rhetorics of gender and sexuality; my stories become another tool to protect them from the evils of gendered and sexual violence in their many ventures.

It seems fitting to end my reflection on EDM at sunset. As I relaxed on the side of a foothill covered with mostly dead sod, I felt gratitude that my summer of fieldwork was coming to a close. I asked myself a question that had become repetitious in my inner dialog over the preceding months. “What might I have missed?” “Everything,” I thought back to myself. Sure enough, I could have heard the songs, but I wouldn’t have seen the decadent costumes or felt their course texture brush against me as festies smiled and passed quickly by. I would not have smelled the waste and felt the vibrations that leaked from the festival grounds. I could not have afforded the speakers nor rallied the crowds that overwhelmed my body and made newly imagined politics of gender and sexuality feel possible.

I thought to myself as the setting sun turned the man-made pond in front of me brilliantly orange. If I hadn’t been here. . . I would have missed it all. (Nocturnal Wonderland, 2021)

ENDNOTES

¹ Notes from my performative participant observations appear in italics throughout this manuscript along with the name of the festival that inspired them and year they were recorded. Placing field notes in italics is a stylistic choice I adapt from Michael Middleton, Aaron Hess, Danielle Endres, and Samantha Senda-Cook in *Participatory Critical Rhetoric: Theoretical and Methodological Foundations for Studying Rhetoric in Situ* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2015).

² Mahita Gajanan, “How Music Festivals Became a Massive Business in the 50 Years Since Woodstock,” *Time*, August 14, 2019, <https://time.com/5651255/business-of-music-festivals>.

³ Gajanan, “How Music Festivals Became a Massive Business.”

⁴ “Beyond Wonderland SoCal,” BeyondWonderlandSoCal.com, Insomniac Holdings LLC, accessed May 3, 2021, <https://socal.beyondwonderland.com/>; “Life Is Beautiful 2021 Is Sold Out - Waitlist & Ticket Exchange Now Live,” Life Is Beautiful Music & Art Festival, accessed May 3, 2021. <https://lifeisbeautiful.com/>; August Brown, “160,000 Music Fans Pour into SoCal’s Hard Summer Festival in Face of Delta Variant Surge,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 2, 2021, <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/music/story/2021-08-02/hard-summer-festival-delta-variant>.

⁵ Throughout this manuscript, I will refer to EDM festival attendees as participants in rave communities. I will also use several slang terms to refer to participants that originate from within the communities. These terms include festie, raver, EDM fan, dancers, rave moms, wooks, flo artists etc. When integral to the analysis I will explain these different character roles, but I often use festie, raver, EDM fan, participant, and attendee interchangeably.

⁶ My motivating interest in this study is in how gender and sexuality are constituted via EDM festivals. My work is grounded in intersectional feminist theory, which recognizes the ways power and privilege are impacted by individuals’ situation within systems and structures, and specifically considers the salience of race, class, gender, and the like. My analysis proceeds from the premise that gender and sexuality cannot be extricated from consideration of race.

⁷ I take my conceptualization of ritual from Mikhail Mikhaïlovich Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1968), and Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.) As a rhetorical scholar, I understand ritual as a repetitive expression performed as symbolic representation of social structures. Examples include the uncrowning Bakhtin described as the crescendo of medieval carnival and the kandi exchanges I describe from EDM festival experiences.

⁸Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry Into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, ed. Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991).

⁹ Habermas. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*.

¹⁰ Nancy Fraser's is perhaps the most notable feminist critique of Habermas in rhetorical studies. She argues that the public sphere Habermas imagined to exist was always conceptually and materially incomplete. Envisioning his public sphere from the standpoint of a participant in European Bourgeois society, Habermas tends to overlook the raced and gendered norms of public participation. See Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," *Social Text*, no. 25/26 (1990): 56–80, <https://doi.org/10.2307/466240>; and Craig Calhoun's edited series, *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993).

¹¹ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*.

¹² Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*; Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*.

¹³ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*.

¹⁴ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*.

¹⁵ Barbara Biesecker, "Coming to Terms with Recent Attempts to Write Women into the History of Rhetoric," *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 25, no. 2 (1992): 140-61, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40237715>; Karma R. Chávez and Cindy L. Griffin, eds., *Standing in the Intersection: Feminist Voices, Feminist Practices in Communication Studies* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2012); Carrie Crenshaw, "Women in the Gulf War: Toward an Intersectional Feminist Rhetorical Criticism," *Howard Journal of Communications: Formation of Gender and Ethnicity* 8, no. 3 (1997): 219-35, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10646179709361756>; Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum* (1989): 139-67, <http://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/uclf/vol1989/iss1/8>; Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241-1299, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039>; Emily Deering Crosby, "Chased by the Double Bind: Intersectionality and the Disciplining of Lolo Jones," *Women's Studies in Communication* 39, no. 2 (2016): 228–48, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07491409.2016.1172388>; Olga I. Davis, "A Black Woman as Rhetorical Critic: Validating Self and Violating the Space of Otherness," *Women and Language* 21, no. 1 (1998): 77-90, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07491409.1998.10162414>; Rachel Alicia Griffin, "I AM an Angry Black Woman: Black Feminist Autoethnography, Voice, and Resistance," *Women's Studies in Communication* 35, no. 2 (2012): 138–57; Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Silge, *Intersectionality* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2016); Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

¹⁶ Stephen Brown, Lorna Stevens, and Pauline Maclaran, "I Can't Believe It's Not Bakhtin!: Literary Theory, Postmodern Advertising, and the Gender Agenda," *Journal of Advertising* 28, no. 1 (1999): 11–24, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00913367.1999.10673573>.

¹⁷ Erin M. Reser, "Strategies of Negotiation in Mainstream Media: Vernacular Discourse and Masculinity in The Full Monty," *Popular Communication* 3, no. 4 (2005): 217–37, https://doi.org/10.1207/s15405710pc0304_1.

¹⁸ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*.

¹⁹ Julia Menard-Warwick, "'My Little Sister Had a Disaster, She Had a Baby': Gendered Performance, Relational Identities, and Dialogic Voicing," *Narrative Inquiry* 17, no. 2 (2007): 279–97, <https://doi.org/10.1075/ni.17.2.07men>.

²⁰ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*.

²¹ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*.

²² Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 336.

²³ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 89.

²⁴ Menard-Warwick, "'My Little Sister Had a Disaster, She Had a Baby'."

²⁵ Paul Booth, "Slash and Porn: Media Subversion, Hyper-Articulation, and Parody," *Continuum* 28, no. 3 (2014): 396–409, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10304312.2014.893985>.

²⁶ Booth, "Slash and Porn," 396.

²⁷ James A. Janack, "The Rhetoric of 'The Body': Jesse Ventura and Bakhtin's Carnival," *Communication Studies* 57, no. 2 (June 2006): 197–214, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10510970600666875>.

²⁸ Janack, "The Rhetoric of 'The Body'."; Julia Menard-Warwick, "'My Little Sister Had a Disaster, She Had a Baby'."; Booth, "Slash and Porn."

²⁹ Janack, "The Rhetoric of 'The Body'."

³⁰ Filipp Sapienza, "Mikhail Bakhtin, Vyacheslav Ivanov, and the Rhetorical Culture of the Russian Third Renaissance," *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 37, no. 2 (April 2004): 123–42, <https://doi.org/10.1353/par.2004.0018>.

³¹ Polly Bugros Mclean and David Wallace, "Blogging the Unspeakable: Racial Politics, Bakhtin, and the Carnavalesque," *International Journal of Communication* 7, (January 2013): 1518–37.

³² Euni Kim, “‘An Impression of Asian People’: Asian American Comedy, Rhetoric, and Identity in Ali Wong’s Stand-Up Comedy,” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 24, no. 1/2 (Spring/Summer 2021): 307–32, muse.jhu.edu/article/803165.

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