

QUEER DIGITAL PERFORMANCE DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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## **Abstract**

This ethnography traces the creation and evolution of digital performance spaces during the COVID-19 pandemic, following a group of queer and trans performers and artists as they created digital performance and community spaces across multiple virtual platforms. For these interlocutors, the pandemic was characterized by distinctive shifts in uses of technologies and artistic mediums, alongside shifts in how this community conceptualized queer performance, community, spacemaking, safety, care, and joy in the digital realm.

This research followed the trajectory of queer digital performance through seventeen months of digital fieldwork, participant-observation, and extensive interviews. This research also employed arts-based practices as ethnographic methods, partaking in what Pink (2011) terms “making visual representations”. These artistic methods enabled the visual representation of the absences and silences which came to characterize much of my interlocutors’ virtual worlds in this time.

Four core themes emerged in this research. The first examines how space and place are made and experienced online, arguing that my interlocutors engage in and understand spacemaking and community-building in hostile digital environments as both political tactics and radical acts of care. The second teases out a tension between the increased access digital performance provides to many queer people who could not attend in-person spaces or did not feel comfortable in them and the new barriers to access that arose in digital spaces for other community members. The third examines the policing and erasure of representations of queerness and transness in digital space, arguing that moderation and “adult content ban” policies have been increasingly weaponized to target and harass queer and trans users on these platforms, effectively erasing queer content and users from these platforms. The fourth engages with the storytelling choices my interlocutors made to refuse dominant narratives about queer life and instead center queer joy

in their art, which I argue constitute a refusal of heteronormative framings of queerness which center pain and injury. Ultimately, I argue that my interlocutors' efforts to build and maintain safe community-oriented digital performance and community spaces – which I call queer communities of care – were political, and often strategic, acts of care and of refusal.

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## **Introduction**

During the COVID-19 pandemic, public health restrictions shuttered performance venues across Toronto. In response, many queer performers and producers transitioned their performance practices to digital platforms and began to build virtual communities. My dissertation examines how queer performing artists adapted social media, image-sharing, video conferencing, and livestreaming platforms into digital performance spaces during this time. In the initial weeks of the pandemic, my interlocutors began transitioning their performance practices to social media platforms primarily to connect with their now distanced community. As the pandemic raged on, digital performance evolved from experiments with digital technologies to a long-term project oriented around building community spaces, sustaining queer life both physically and socially, and reimagining the hiring and production practices of the industry. This ethnography traces the creation and evolution of digital performance spaces during the pandemic, following my interlocutors as they moved from social media sites, to Zoom, to Twitch, and to Discord. While the shift to digital spaces was a necessary response to the state of exception of the pandemic – and in some ways rendered live performances more accessible to audiences – the political conditions of this time also rendered these spaces increasingly hostile to visibly queer and trans\* communities.

This research followed the trajectory of digital performance practices through seventeen months of digital fieldwork, participant-observation, and extensive interviews between July 2020 and January 2022. This dissertation examines the evolution of this community's digital performance practices during the pandemic, following them from their early experiments with digital performance on Facebook, Instagram, and Zoom, to their attempts to build public digital communities through performance space on Twitch, and finally to their turn to creating private

performance and community spaces on Discord. During this time, I observed shifts in the community's use of digital technologies, platforms, and artistic mediums, as well as distinct shifts in how my interlocutors thought about community, performance, spacemaking, safety, care, and joy. In the initial weeks and months of the pandemic, my interlocutors understood digital performance as a necessary adaptation that would bridge pandemic restrictions on physical gatherings, and which would help sustain the wellbeing of the community. As the pandemic wore on, my interlocutors began rethinking digital performance, coming to see it as a long-term project that needed to be rendered sustainable for their own wellbeing, and as a critical space for creating and maintaining queer communities of care.

At various points in my fieldwork, particularly throughout 2021, my interlocutors cycled through waves of burnout, due in part to the fact that digital performance required more labour than in-person performance, as well as the wider societal phenomenon of burnout and mental health crises experienced across the country during this time. As my interlocutors worked through their burnout and disenchantment with virtual space at different points in 2021, many attempted to recalibrate their digital performance practices to focus on building spaces that emphasized community-building and space-making. This meant that creating safe spaces and protecting and sustaining the physical and social life of the queer community ultimately became more important than the caliber or aesthetics of the performances that were happening in those spaces.

By safe spaces, my interlocutors were referring to cultivating virtual spaces that were not only free of harassment and discrimination, but which prioritized psychological, emotional, and social safety of their audiences and of each other. In my initial interviews in 2020, many of my interlocutors expressed a desire to permanently take up and integrate digital technologies and

media into their future in-person performance practices, through practices ranging from incorporating multimedia into in-person performances to simulcasting or livestreaming of live in-person shows to virtual audiences. Others were adamant from the beginning that digital was a necessary evil that they would jettison when it was no longer necessary to survive. As the pandemic dragged on, more and more of the former camp began expressing to me that they no longer saw a future for digital performance at all because it was too taxing, they were too tired, and the realities of those years had hit them far too hard.

### The Shift to Digital Performance

The declaration of a global pandemic in March 2020 was followed by the introduction of public health restrictions across the country. Physical distancing or “lockdown” policies, which were originally meant to last only a few weeks, slowed the rate of infection but also severely disrupted social connections and the economy, which had unintended psychological and social consequences across Canada. Like everyone else at this time, my interlocutors sought new or alternative ways to connect with their loved ones and community, which ultimately drove them to build digital community spaces. While the need for community and connection was not unique, the circumstances my interlocutors faced as identifiably queer and trans people in those spaces – which so many others used to connect without incident – created a unique set of challenges for this community.

Originally, this project was focused on interrogating how certain political and homonationalist themes and discourses were (re)produced, taken up, or contested in queer performances in this community. Much like my interlocutors, I adapted my work in response to the then daunting idea that the world as we knew it was changing radically, quickly, and in unimaginable and unpredictable ways. In-person fieldwork became dangerous and unethical as I

prepared to enter the field in the spring of 2020, necessitating a shift to a digital field and digital fieldwork. I had already been immersed in the Toronto queer arts community for some time and was aware of the conversations happening just before I began my research – namely, that my interlocutors were concerned about their immediate survival, about what this crisis would mean for the art, about how the community would physically and socially survive this crisis, and adaptation. These pre-existing ties to the community and this knowledge of these conversations drove the direction of my research. This work was a response to the pressing and urgent nature of an emergency – and arguably disaster-like and catastrophic – situation; it also became a response to the larger political movements (particularly the transphobic so-called gender critical movement) that emerged, solidified, and gained mainstream support and legitimacy online during the pandemic.

In March 2020, a number of experimental digital drag shows were quickly put together and, as one of the only forms of live entertainment available, received large and diverse audiences. These shows also garnered brand sponsorships and generous tipping from audience members. But as the pandemic crept on into April and then to May and it became clear that things were not going to return to normal anytime soon, people were laid off, fired, lost contracts and bookings, and disposable income dried up quickly. So too did the tipping economy. My interlocutors would joke that in that period, the entire community was passing around the same five dollar bill from person to person, show to show. When the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) began rolling out in early May 2020, many of my interlocutors found themselves excluded from eligibility, due in large part to how they had previously been compensated for their in-person performance work. Many of my interlocutors were paid by bar venues in cash or other under-the-table methods and were not receiving T4s to report this

income, so many simply did not report it on their taxes. Likewise, while tips are meant to be reported for tax purposes, many of my interlocutors did not claim their tips in previous filings. For some, this didn't feel like a big deal at the time as they made so little from these gigs anyways. Others simply did not know how to report that income, and some knew that there were no real consequences to not doing so. Regardless of reason, many of my interlocutors found themselves not meeting the income threshold for CERB and were essentially left behind by the federal government's economic response to the pandemic.

A number of community support networks and emergency funds organized by local community leaders, organizations, and iconic venues within the Toronto queer community sprung up to try to keep those who were excluded from these benefits afloat financially. Likewise, a number of institutions like Pride Toronto or Buddies in Bad Times Theatre began developing programs specifically for loaning equipment to artists to use at home for recording and streaming, which enabled many artists to access high quality cameras and microphones that they otherwise could not afford to buy outright. These funds, networks, and programs helped alleviate some of the most pressing needs felt in the community, it did not and could not alleviate the larger sense of economic precarity performing artists faced at this time. The sense of urgency that emerged around the precarity of the performing arts at this time paired with the very real economic urgency felt by my interlocutors inspired my personal investment in this project.

Beyond the economics, necessary public health measures also resulted in very real social, cultural, and communal impacts in the queer community. As will be explored in-depth in later chapters, the inability to physically connect disrupted pre-existing networks that helped connect queer people with material aid, resources, and core services. The pandemic only increased the need for material support for many of the most vulnerable and precarious members of the queer

community; as such, there was an immediate need to create new networks to sustain queer life through the provision of mutual aid and virtual resources and supports. In response to this need, my interlocutors worked to build digital communities of care that spanned across multiple pre-existing platforms, coopting and adapting their infrastructure and functions to meet their communities' needs. As I outline in this dissertation, these digital communities of care cannot be considered outside of the harms and challenges present on the digital platforms my interlocutors coopted to build communities of care – namely that homophobia, transphobia, racialized and ableist forms of oppression, and anti-sex work politics that existed on these social media and streaming platforms prior to my interlocutors taking up space there ultimately constrained, and at times outright harmed, my interlocutors and their communities.

This project emerged as a response to both the unique and common ways in which my community was impacted by the pandemic. This project was informed in part by the idea of urgent ethnography, or ethnographic research which responds to the immediate needs of locals in the face of unfolding disaster (Slater 2013). A core aim of urgent ethnography is to capture the complexity of a moment of rupture or disaster by listening to and documenting the everyday experiences of the aftermath of an emergency. Documenting experiences in the immediate aftermath – or in the unfolding of an emergency – was a personal driver in this work. Our memories fade quickly in post-traumatic situations as we adapt to new realities; we forget minute details of events in the proceeding days, weeks, and months. As pandemic life became normalized, I witnessed similar phenomena at work in the field and I am thankful to have some direct accounting, however partial and fragmented, of life in those early waves of COVID-19.

The literature tells us that during and just after a major disaster, there is typically a period when “social form and fabric have dissolved, and survivors find themselves on their own”

(Hoffman 1999, 137). The COVID-19 pandemic was a mass-trauma that had similar effects on social structure and form. For the queer performers with whom I worked, these effects were compounded by the failure of social safety measures to account for their specific circumstances. Moreover, this dissolution of social fabric in the wake of COVID-19 seems to have exacerbated already divisive political movements like so-called trans-exclusionary radical feminism and other anti-trans\* rights movements as well as reactionary movements against anti-racism and critical race theory. The internal complexity of pandemic politics has resulted in a layering of additional traumas and violence against my interlocutors, some of which may be intentional and others which seem to be the product of that failure of society to adapt successfully and sustainably to this protracted rupture.

The shift to digital performance practices in the wake of the pandemic impacted the creative process as well as the dynamics of production in Toronto's queer performance scene. The shift to digital mediums enabled new forms of multimedia content to be produced that would have been logistically and financially impractical on in-person stages. Moreover, the limited focus of the laptop camera meant that choreography, aesthetics, and bodily movements of performers had to be reimagined to fit the digital frame. Prior to the pandemic, the casting and producing networks for many venues were insular; as one drag king told me, many venues and producers will only hire performers who fall within the confines of homonormative – depoliticized, sanitized, white, neoliberal – queerness. The audiences targeted by many of these venues were also limited to those of certain socio-economic statuses and to the able-bodied. The decentralization of media production has altered the politics of production, resulting in the creation of accessible content that can reach multiple publics simultaneously and which includes and showcases QTBIPOC, disabled, and other marginalized performers and artists. Moreover,

digital spaces have created opportunities for performers to produce their own work without the same kind of reliance on institutions; this freedom has empowered performers to call out the problematic practices of many producers and institutions within the Village without risking their entire livelihoods. That is not to suggest, however, that the production of decentralized small media is lucrative work; digital performance work offers different avenues to monetizing artistic practices but remains a financially precarious business. What I am suggesting is that these changes to production and to performance as both process and event have enabled my interlocutors to imagine new tactics through which to contest the existing power structures of working in the Village and being in queer community.

Historically, the gay imaginary has been spatialized and centered around urban communities as beacons of tolerance and the formation of gay political identities and communities were geographically oriented (Weston 1995). These communities have come to be colloquially known as “gayborhoods” or “gay villages” (Meeker 2005). The gay village has been understood as a place where heteronormativity is resisted and contested; however, while gay villages enable and support some alternative gendered and sexual practices, they are arguably limited to those expressions, desires, and subjectivities which operate within the scope of homonormativity (Duggan 2002; Nash 2013). The 1990s ushered gentrification into gay villages across North America, threatening to intervene upon and cleanse neighbourhoods so as to make them safe for capital investment. In practice, gentrification brought skyrocketing rents and priced queer institutions, businesses, and residents out of gay villages. As Cavalcante (2019) argues, the momentum of gentrification has transformed many gayborhoods and has weakened them as the center of queer worldmaking. We now see a trend towards “queer cultural archipelagos”

(Ghaziani 2014) – queer spaces that are smaller, fragmented, and more flexible than the gay village, but which are vibrant locales of queer cultures and communities.

While there is no singular monolithic queer community in Toronto, the majority of queer-owned and oriented artistic venues and nightlife are still located in or proximate to the Church-Wellesley Gay Village. However, the surge of digital performance content necessitated by the pandemic has shifted some aspects of queer social life. Digital media and social media platforms exist among a queer cultural archipelago which serves to enable communication, learning, teaching, and activism, essentially fulfilling some of the social functions of physical institutions like the gay bar (Cavalcante 2019). These digital queer cultural archipelagos enable the organization of new queer publics and counterpublics, facilitate the exchange of information about queer identities and lives, and serve as accessible intergenerational archival spaces of queer histories and collective memories (Cavalcante 2019; Fink and Miller 2014). The digital queer cultural archipelago – and the ability to find, access, and be in those spaces – became even more central to queer life and culture during the pandemic, as the few physical spaces which made up pieces of those archipelagos became inaccessible and gathering became an exclusively digital affair. This has meant that queer imaginaries or queer counterpublics – as they existed in a time of pandemic and isolation – were mediated through technological filters and mediums that have historically been harnessed by dominant social groups, commercial interests, and the state.

### Laying the Groundwork

In this dissertation, I take as my point of departure Leslie Hill's (2000) argument that the performance art of marginalized or dispossessed communities is shaped by necessity and emerges as a response to being systematically excluded from traditional and/or institutional performance and art spaces. In this context, I understand digital queer performance as indelibly

shaped by manifestations of power and dominant societal narratives about queer and trans life. As I will detail in the chapters that follow, my interlocutors responded to the pandemic by attempting to carve out spaces on pre-existing platforms for performing and building community around those performances. The digital environments my interlocutors co-opted reproduced and enabled anti-queer violence at the same time that they enabled new digital possibilities for queer community building.

In engaging with my interlocutors' performances and community-building practices, this dissertation addresses four major themes. The first examines how space and place are made and experienced online, arguing that my interlocutors engage in an understand spacemaking and community-building in hostile digital environments as both political tactics and acts of care. The second teases out a tension between the increased access digital performance provides to many queer people who could not attend in-person spaces or did not feel comfortable in them and the new barriers to access that arose in digital spaces for other community members. The third examines the policing and erasure of representations of queerness and transness in digital space, arguing that moderation and "adult content ban" policies have been increasingly weaponized to target and harass queer, trans, and racialized users on these platforms, effectively erasing queer content and excluding queer users from these platforms. The fourth engages with the storytelling choices my interlocutors have made to refuse trauma narratives and dominant logics about queer life and instead move towards centering queer joy in their art. These choices constitute a refusal of heteronormative framings of queerness which center pain and injury and bring forth new potentialities and worlding processes.

Ultimately, I argue that my interlocutors' efforts to build and maintain safe community-oriented digital performance and community spaces were political, and often strategic, acts of

care and of refusal. That is to say, what my interlocutors did in these spaces to build queer digital communities (making space or spacemaking) paired with the intentional decentering of trauma and (re)centering of queer joy, harm reduction, and safety practices constitute care practices that are specific to the time, space, and technology of digital life during the pandemic. I define care for the purposes of this dissertation as a process which connects the caring and the cared-for in order to meet socially recognized needs and sustain the physical and social existence of the community, making up assemblages known as communities of care. Thinking about the use of care and performance as both implicitly and explicitly political acts, I frame the artistic choices and care practices my interlocutors employed as tactics. De Certeau (1984) delineates between strategies, the means through which institutions and structures (re)produce relations of power, and the actions that the disempowered take to unsettle or diverge from prescribed conventions and structures of power, which he terms tactics. As I will demonstrate in this dissertation, my interlocutors understood their acts of refusal and performance practices to be inseparable from how they understood providing care. In conceptualizing care as a range of social, semiotic, and performative practices aimed at sustaining the social existence of a community, my interlocutors' political acts of refusal or resistance to violent structures should be understood as intentional acts to the sustain the community's life. I understand the attempts of my interlocutors to undermine the dominant power structures of the Village and to unsettle the prescribed conventions of digital spaces like Twitch through the intentional practice of spacemaking to be what I term care tactics.

Following from how my interlocutors understood their own actions and philosophies about community and art, I argue that building digital communities of care and exercising care tactics in that effort was part of a larger refusal to reproduce queer trauma narratives and to instead center queer and trans\* joy. As I will expand upon in later chapters, my interlocutors refused to

reproduce dominant narratives of queer and trans suffering and trauma, which work to render their stories or experiences legible to cis-heteronormative audiences through tropes of victimhood. Building on Saidiya Hartman's (1997) argument that the personhood of marginalized peoples is always already coterminous with injury within the white liberal imaginary, I explore how my interlocutors used digital performance and digital spacemaking to refuse that form of (mis)recognition. Instead, I argue, my interlocutors purposefully moved away from "identity-based pieces" or stories about queer trauma and instead moved to center queer joy, excellence, and celebration in their art and the digital communities they built up around it.

In this context, refusal is inextricably connected to my interlocutors' conceptualization of trauma. Prior to the pandemic, my interlocutors experienced an overwhelming demand from audiences, producers, funders, and other culture and arts workers to fit their stories into a dominant narrative around queerness which centered traumatic experiences. That is to say that they felt they were expected to tell stories about their experiences that conformed to dominant heteronormative ideas of the challenges and violence faced by queer and trans\* people in such a way that rendered them always already victims and relegated them to the "suffering slot". That the pain of the Other – however that Other is constructed – is fetishized by dominant social groups is not a new proposition; speaking specifically to racialized violence, Hartman illustrates that the personhood of racialized people in the white cultural imaginary is constructed in relation to pain, "making personhood coterminous with injury" (1997, 93). They are traumatized, therefore they *are*. For my interlocutors, this manifested through specific requests or bookings to perform what some of my interlocutors called "identity-based pieces" (and others called "trauma porn") about trauma, injury, and pain for organisations and/or venues catering to a predominantly white, cisgender, and heterosexual audience. To be clear, that is not to say that this is the only

way that queer people navigate such narratives or pressures to conform to them. Queer people can, and certainly do, engage with and even embrace these narratives for a myriad of reasons that should not be discounted or erased.

One of my interlocutors, Nicholas, was very vocal about his experiences with these bookings. Nicholas is a trans-masculine drag artist whose drag house, The Monarchs, centered their artistic practices around showcasing queer joy and excellence and creating safe escapist spaces for their queer audiences. Nicholas and his friends talked about these identity-based bookings as “trauma porn” – reductive and sometimes offensive showcases of queer trauma for the cis-heteronormative gaze. In one conversation over Zoom, I mused aloud, “why are they so keen to consume this? The trauma porn of it all? What does that do for them?” Nicolas answered, “I really don’t know. I’m paid well and frequently enough by a *lot* of straight people to say *that stuff*. Like a sideshow. I have no idea what they get out of it besides pointing and staring at us and then patting themselves on the back for raising awareness. But I at least get money”. This dynamic in which queer and trans artists are hired to “say that stuff”, to perform their trauma for consumption, shaped how my interlocutors and their collaborators framed their artistic works during the pandemic. In fact, this underlying tension around these types of “identity-based” pieces coupled with the emergent threats of both the pandemic and growing vitriol against trans and queer people online led many of them to reorient and recenter their performance work around safeguarding and maintaining the physical and social life of their community.

Rather than fighting to be seen or recognized within that framework, my interlocutors refused it altogether. Refusal has been theorized as a political and ethical stance in opposition to the desire to be recognized within a framework that always already misrecognized and dehumanizes marginalized communities as Other and apart (Simpson 2011). The pandemic and the turn to

digital performance created distinct opportunities for my interlocutors to platform themselves rather than be reliant on being booked. In this sense, they had more artistic freedom to perform non-traditional and perhaps non-commercially viable routines that would never have been booked by their usual in-person venues.

This enabled them to cater their work to the queer and trans audiences they built online and to produce and perform art that recognized each other's humanity and subjecthood through celebrations of queer joy rather than injury and suffering. In this sense, celebrating queerness and queer joy was a radical turn. It is this refusal to engage with trauma narratives and heteronormative avenues for recognition and legibility that I am concerned with in this work. While 2020 ushered in and amplified a time of increased anti-trans and anti-queer politics and violence, it was also a time full of hope, joy, and love, and this is equally important to record and acknowledge. Building on the philosophies of my interlocutors, I argue throughout this dissertation that centering queer joy created space to nurture and grow queer potentialities, queer resistance, and queer futurities; it is my contention in this work that the digital spaces and art my interlocutors created around this celebration of queer joy have liberatory potentials and political inherencies.

At the core of this dissertation is the question of what is at stake when we refuse to center queer trauma and instead move towards queer joy. Building on Bobby Noble's (2013) theorization of corporeal incoherence, I argue that when trauma narratives and injurious images become the only visible and knowable options for queer life, queer and trans\* people cannot find reassuring evidence that they may live well and fully in their own bodies. I argue that this enables and reproduces a self-perpetuating dominant narrative and image-world made up of misrepresentations of queer and trans\* life that deliberately excludes stories and images of queer

and trans\* people living a good life. I argue that those exclusions are constructed and purposeful absences, as these dominant narratives of queer suffering and trauma can only exist if actual queer histories are distorted, misrepresented, and erased. Centering queer joy, then, is contingent on refusing to center trauma, and this refusal makes room for new queer possibilities and futurities.

In writing about queer joy, it is necessary to engage with violence, power, and inequity. On the one hand, some scholars are wary of how joy can be used to distract from or obfuscate institutional or state violence, which can in turn produce new forms of exclusion. Others are concerned that joy functions as a kind of neoliberal discourse of self-care which displaces the burden of survival from the state and onto individuals (Banerjee 2020; Stuelke 2021; Stainova 2024). On the other hand, joy has come to constitute a modality of activism. Rooted in the notion of “black joy” (Gay 2019), a form of activism focused on the wellbeing, healing, rest, and, ultimately, pleasure of racialized communities, pleasure activism and the notion of joy as radical and/or political has come to occupy a prominent space in mainstream discourse. In this context, joy “is the labor of imagining an otherwise, surviving, and even thriving” (Stainova 2024, 639-640) in the face of violence, dispossession, and intersecting forms of oppression.

*Figure 1: A painting of an anonymized Twitch channel from my fieldnotes.*



This multimedia piece is a collage of different paintings, cut and pasted together on my living room floor around midnight after an evening of watching Twitch performances to make up this representation of one of my interlocutor's Twitch channels. When I created this image, my intention was to capture the way the community interacted via this platform. It also captures the curated nature of my experience of Twitch, with drag channels filling the “followed channels” sidebar and some LGBTQIA+ labelled content in my recommended sidebar, below the more standard gaming content that proliferates much of the platform. The performer in the livestream is set against a background of SARS-CoV-2 – a reproduction of the actual backdrop of a performance I had watched that evening. The performer, drawn in pencil, is an amalgamation of several interlocutors, draw and redrawn until she resembled both everyone and no one. At the time, my intent in making this was to capture this space visually but in an anonymized way; there was no simple way to photograph or screenshot this space without blurring or obscuring almost every element to protect anonymity and the protect the channels from being identified in any publications. Maintaining the safety of the space meant recreating it artistically and taking license to obscure identifying characteristics.

## Introducing the Field

### *The People*

This dissertation follows my interlocutors, their friends and collaborators, and to a lesser extent their audiences through these online spaces. My entry points to the field were primarily through “houses” or “families” – these terms originate in drag ball culture, referring to a group of drag performers who grouped themselves into families or houses, led by a house mother or house

parent, as a source of chosen family and a support system in ball competitions. In contemporary queer culture, houses extend beyond the ball scene, and the supports they provide one another may include performing together and booking one another for shows. One such digital drag house was the aforementioned Monarchs, a trans-inclusive drag house that had been based out of Glad Day Bookshop prior to the pandemic. The Monarchs made space for artists outside of the mainstream – that is, for those who were marginalized, even within the queer community, which reflected their own experiences of exclusion as trans and gender non-conforming people.

The Monarchs did not have a house parent but were co-led by four young drag and gender performers: Nicholas, Dante, Micah, and Noah. Nicholas is a white transmasculine drag performer with a signature aesthetic rooted in French Rococo style. The Monarchs would often work in pairs, and Nicholas worked most often with Dante, a Black trans\* drag king who had moved to Toronto from the east coast prior to the pandemic. Dante's aesthetic was intentional reminiscent of iconic Black performers, with traces of the artist formerly known as Prince always visible in their costuming. Nicholas and Dante were more explicitly political in their work; by this I mean they spoke about the politics de jour when hosting – whether you wanted to hear about it or not. The other pairing was of Micah and Noah. Micah is a white non-binary gender performer who self-described as a clown and a dandy – the latter referring to the dandyism aesthetic. At the time, Micah was also a graduate student at a local university. Noah was the youngest member of the group; while the others were in their mid to late twenties, Noah was barely twenty when the pandemic hit. Noah is transfeminine, Black, and openly identified as poor. Noah was also – very intentionally – the clown of the group, with a signature voguing style of performance rather than a signature aesthetic.

The Monarchs often worked with the same cast of friends and collaborators, who quickly became part of this work, including Elsie, Silas, Elke, Gabriel, Georgia and Ollie. Elsie is an elderly white drag, burlesque and theatre performer – much of which was self-taught. Elsie had spent much of her adult life in the closet and came to queer community later than many, an experience that was at the center of her autobiographical one woman show she had begun performing before the pandemic. She had expanded this style of weaving queer history and personal truth telling into short numbers she would perform on Zoom throughout the pandemic, in which she would portray historic women and queer figures, monologuing her way into a musical number. There was also Gabriel, who was physically based in Ottawa but was tightly knit into the Toronto scene. Gabriel is a cisgender woman and a drag king; ciswomen drag performers continue to be marginalized and excluded from queer spaces, even today, which was part of what kept him so connected to the Monarchs. Gabriel had some experience with online performance prior to the pandemic and had the digital skills base to learn complicated effects very quickly, making the production value of his live performances show stealing. Gabriel was generous with those skills, and always tried to teach other artists how to recreate what he had done. Georgia was another regular collaborator of the Monarchs. While Georgia did drag, they were first and foremost a burlesque artist and self-referred as a draglesque performer. They are a white, non-binary person in their late twenties and incredibly self-assured in their art. Their performances were often risqué and, as later chapters will unpack, got the Monarchs livestreams into some trouble.

Etienne was another interlocutor who moved between spaces and groups. Etienne is a queer racialized poet and artist who was based in Vancouver at the time. Over the course of the pandemic, he took on a new role as a producer for nationwide digital drag shows and worked

with countless drag and gender performers in Toronto. He also worked closely with key figures at venues in the Church-Wellesley Village on a number of projects, events, and festivals prior to the pandemic, which then extended into collaborations during the digital era. Etienne's experiences as a producer differed from my interlocutors; Etienne already had significant cultural capital in Vancouver and was able to obtain sponsorships and grants to support the digital drag he produced in 2020. He and his partner – a drag performer – also had more significant financial resources than many other performers going into the pandemic. Nonetheless, he shared unfortunate experiences of online targeted harassment for his open support of queer causes and activism, as well as his support for Black Lives Matter in the summer of 2020.

Another key digital drag institution was the Underground, a digital drag bar hosted on Twitch.tv. The Underground was not explicitly a house but functioned similarly to one in terms of the relationships between the core members. The Underground was started by Liese as a direct response to the pandemic, serving the short term need for hospitable digital performance and social spaces for queer artists. Liese was the channel's main producer, and the real beating heart and parental figure of the group. She was also an artist who had started streaming her art content to Twitch before the pandemic. She had struggled, before COVID, to get her friends from the community onto the platform. Then, in the initial weeks of lockdown, a friend and local drag performer Courtney messaged Liese about helping her host a viewing party on Twitch; Liese and Courtney would go on to start the Underground following the success of that one off stream. The channel evolved over the course of the pandemic into a full digital drag bar, which Liese described now as an "organic self-perpetuating machine". When we spoke about the early days of the Underground, Liese laughed as she described how those early streams were "really funky" looking; "I knew what I was doing and [the stream] ran smooth[ly], it's just...well they didn't

look cool or advanced like our stuff looks now,” Liese confided in reference to the high production value of their work in 2022. Liese and Courtney would eventually be joined by Emm, another core producer. Emm is a gay man and a scholar of queer theatre and drag but was not himself an artist or performer at that time.

Among the regular cast of performers at the Underground were Matilda, Violet, Elke, and Allegra. Matilda is a self-described drag clown, a sort of scheming cartoon character. Matilda imagined herself “a lot like Barbie, in the sense that she comes with 101 accessories and she’s always playing roles...whether she’s a CEO or an astronaut or a spy, she’s always got a job that she’s doing. But then she’s always like fucking it up”, she told me, describing her drag persona in the third person, as if a separate entity. Matilda is a transwoman and exclusively did highly feminine drag, which is not uncommon, but remains a relatively contentious positionality in the drag community.<sup>1</sup> Violet is an Indigenous 2-Spirit playwright, burlesque dancer, and performer based in Toronto. Violet is in their thirties and had just hit a period of commercial success with their theatre work prior to the pandemic. They spent much of the pandemic experimenting with their burlesque persona on the Underground and workshopping and then digitally staging a play about their family’s experience of intergenerational trauma. Elke is a two-spirit drag artist who performed regularly at the Underground and with the Monarchs and used digital performance as an opportunity to experiment with pre-recorded content and video editing. Allegra was an integral part of the Underground line up, performing multiple times a week, hosting shows, and

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<sup>1</sup> In recent years, there has been some antagonism between trans communities and drag performers centered around the difference between what one understands drag to be. For those who understand drag to only and always be female impersonation, cis and trans women performing in feminine drag has become a contentious issue. Moreover, there are some trans people who feel that drag is inherently transphobic because it may imply that gender is simply a matter of “dressing up”. While both trans and cis women do perform in feminine drag, it can be (but is not always) a complicated position to hold within queer, trans, and drag communities.

eventually, acting as a producer as well. Allegra is a racialized drag performer styled in the Club Kids aesthetic and a comedian who has since gone on to compete in a popular drag competition show.

A group that was emerging on the scene at this time was led by Billie. Billie is a white multi-disciplinary queer artist and gender performer. During the pandemic, they lived with their parents in a rural community a few hours outside of Toronto and took fostering digital communities for queer people stuck in unfriendly places extremely seriously. Billie didn't have a house per se, but a collection of co-conspirators who collectively maintained digital queer support groups, community spaces, and poetry slams. They also made sure that digital, and later physically distanced, productions of Rocky Horror went on throughout the pandemic. As they returned to in-person work in 2022, they began forming a cast of performers who now regularly put on Our Flag Means Death themed cabaret shows across Toronto.

Other key interlocutors who were less attached to specific platforms or houses but generally worked with all of the aforementioned artists at some point during the pandemic included Tatiana, Emery, Dee, Fran and Bini. Dee and Emery are racialized multi-disciplinary cabaret artists and Tatiana a white plus-sized burlesque artist. Their art forms and work often overlapped with drag and other queer art forms, with burlesque and cabaret spaces having historically been safe and welcoming spaces for drag kings and gender performers outside of the mainstream. Bini is a performance and video artist of Acadian, Mi'kmaq and European descent who had previously worked in health outreach and harm reduction in various queer communities across Canada. Now comfortably middle aged, Bini had been a political rabble rouser and outspoken performance artist long before some of my younger interlocutors had been born. They didn't always fit in with the Village drag or theatre folks and felt much more at ease with the burlesque

community and the art school crowd. Fran came from a completely different perspective. When I met her, she was a white drag queen in her mid-twenties who hosted extremely successful show in the Village. Her drag was comedic and had catered to audiences of middle class white gay men and straight women with disposal income seeking politically neutral entertainment. Fran's persona evolved significantly over the pandemic, as she went on to use her platform to host critical race theory reading groups in the Village over the summer and fall of 2020, and eventually became disenchanted with the politics of the drag scene altogether. The pandemic wore her down, and when last we spoke in 2022, she was preparing to move on from her time as Fran, retiring from her longstanding hosting gig and passing the torch onto new talent.

This eclectic group of artists floated in and out of each other's orbits and supported and uplifted one another's work throughout the pandemic. They did not always work together, nor did they always see eye to eye on the politics of their work. Indeed, the nuances of how they understood the nature of queer performance, the need to create community spaces and build communities of care, and their responsibilities to one another and the wider community are teased out in this dissertation. While their approaches to the work and their philosophies about what they were doing differed, what is key to this dissertation is that they were all concerned with using queer performance and digital platforms to build communities of care in a time of crisis.

### *The Platforms*

My interlocutors performed across several interconnected and overlapping genres, including drag, draglesque, burlesque, cabaret, and theatre. Drag refers to exaggerated performances of femininity, masculinity, and other forms of gender expression that may involve comedy, lip syncing, musical theatre inspired performances, satire, and/or political commentary. Some of my

interlocutors engaging in this art form self-referred as gender performers rather than drag performers. Some performers combined drag with burlesque and self-described as draglesque artists. Burlesque as an art form combines dancing and elements of strip teasing with vaudevillian, satirical, and comedic outlooks and performances. Traditionally, humour and exaggeration are core components of burlesque, which enables its overlap with drag and gender performance. This is similar to cabaret, which may include a wider variety of art forms and acts. Some of my interlocutors were also playwrights or theatre performers. Theatre refers to a specific kind of staged performance that immerses audiences in a story and which emphasizes liveness and co-presence. Of course, the boundaries between these genres and art forms are nebulous at best, with elements of theatricality, dance, music, comedy, and exaggerated gender performance being component activities of each aforementioned genre.

My interlocutors made use of a number of platforms to facilitate digital performance during the pandemic. These included Facebook and Instagram, where my interlocutors primarily used the Live functions of each platform to livestream performances to their audience of followers. The Live function also enabled them to invite other users to broadcast with them, effectively splitting the screen between two live camera feeds coming from two separate accounts. Some of my interlocutors also used Instagram for promotion, booking work, communicating with other performers and audiences, sharing pre-recorded videos and images, as well as more traditional social networking. A few of my interlocutors uploaded recordings of past live performances or pre-recorded numbers to YouTube, while artists like Violet used the Live function on this platform to livestream a staged reading of a new play. Toronto Pride also made use of YouTube for some performances throughout the pandemic as the Premiere function on the platform enabled live and pre-recorded video to be simulcast to an audience connected in a live chat,

which in turn would remain visible to those rewatching the video following the end of the stream.

In 2020, Zoom was a commonly used platform. Zoom allows users to create and join virtual meetings rooms, essentially web-based conference calls with both audio and video capabilities. Zoom additionally is equipped with capabilities to share files, one's computer screen, text chats, and whiteboards with other users. A Zoom performance looks more or less like a typical large Zoom meeting. My interlocutors would create the meeting ahead of time and share the Zoom meeting link/Meeting ID and password, if applicable in the promotional materials for an event. This is the information the audience would use to join the meeting at the scheduled time; depending on the event and host, the audience might be allowed right into the meeting or held in a virtual waiting room until the performers were ready. The performers, hosts, and producers typically assembled in the room ahead of time. When performers were performing live, the host would pin the performer's video so that it remained visible throughout the performance and the performer would share their audio or visuals from their computer or device. For recorded video performances, the host would queue up the videos before the show and then share their screen to play the video in fullscreen at the appropriate time in the show.

The vast majority of my fieldwork was based on Twitch.tv, a live streaming platform that focuses primarily on video gaming and esports competition streaming. Whereas Facebook and Instagram support shortform content, Twitch supports long session (6+ hours) streaming and marathon (24+ hours) streaming. Like Facebook Live, Twitch records and saves a library of past streams for later view on demand, but does so only for two weeks whereas Facebook saves them indefinitely. Streamers are able to download their recordings to their own devices from Twitch; a number of my interlocutors, particularly the Underground drag bar, have amassed substantial

private archives of digital drag from 2020-2022. Twitch became the predominant platform my interlocutors used for live streaming drag and some cabaret and burlesque during the pandemic, in part because it gave streamers more technical abilities and creative options, and in part because it was a platform that was focused on community-building and more straight-forward paths to monetization. Twitch, of course, was not designed as a performance space, nor were/are its targeted users queer artists. As a producer at The Underground, Liese, explained to me, the migration of queer artists to Twitch was really inextricable from the pandemic:

“Before folks had to diversify their online presence post-2020, Twitch was not a platform that many queer performers were exploring, mainly due to the fact that its users were previously straight white males playing video games. Where would the audience be, and where is the safety in a space like that when you’re putting your unique person out into the world? Because of streamers like Biqtch Puddin’<sup>2</sup>, drag content started to slowly drift to the platform. Post-pandemic, small communities of streamers are growing into literal independent networks of content creators. Therefore, the challenge of accruing an audience feels like one that will be less difficult for creators joining up now. While you can stream with basic materials, you can still feel like there is unmet potential without tech toys and upgrades. Therefore, streaming can be something only available to those not experiencing income scarcity, who have disposable time, energy, ability, and money to realize their vision.”

Most of my interlocutors also used OBS, or Open Broadcaster Software to manage technically complex streams. OBS is a free software that does not require coding knowledge but is technically complicated in its own right – many of my interlocutors (and myself) participated in workshops led by Liese to learn the software, with Liese continuing to provide technical support to many community members throughout 2021-2022. OBS enabled streamers to layer multiple audio-video sources, effects, transitions, and graphics, as well as mix and volume correct live audio. The ultimate goal of using OBS, for my interlocutors, was to create a professional

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<sup>2</sup> Biqtch Puddin’ is an American drag performer who rose to notoriety after winning the reality competition show *Dragula*; she is a Twitch partner who streams video gaming content while in drag.

appearing live stream with clean transitions between camera feeds. Higher quality streams with more advanced graphics and effects led to higher viewer engagement, more viewers and promotion by Twitch algorithms, more subscription purchases, and more tipping – much in the same way that a well organized, rehearsed, high quality big budget in-person show tends to generate bigger crowds and more revenue.

Towards the end of my fieldwork, my interlocutors began moving to Discord servers. Discord is an instant messaging and multimedia digital distribution platform, via which one can send text, voice, video, and other media. Discord is organized into servers, which function as a digital community meeting place, much like groups or rooms on Facebook or Zoom. Discord servers can be publicly accessible or private and invitation-only. Within a server, text and voice channels enable communication between the members of that server. The server's owner can create text channels, which function as instant messaging spaces that are also multimedia and file sharing enabled, or voice channels, which enable participants to share live audio and video feeds in a sort of open phone and video conversation. Discord operates on a permission system based on the roles assigned to members, which grant access or visibility to specific channels; members of a server, like the Underground's server for example, interact with each other in the channels they have access to. This means that in practice, one can create a single server with channels for performers to connect and interact, for producer and staff to organize work privately, and for audience members to watch and interact with a performance broadcast, without uninvited guests crashing the stream and without audience members accessing the backstage areas of the server.

### Outline of Chapters

In the first chapter, *Methodology*, I describe my entry into the field and provide an account of the research methods I employed in this research. Throughout this chapter, I reflect on

my use of arts-based practices as a method of ethnographic research and delve into the ethical considerations that shaped my approach to this work. I also begin to position this research relative to the stakes of queer and trans representation that I will articulate in later chapters.

The second chapter, *Literature Review*, outlines the theory and frameworks that inform this dissertation, laying the foundations for the proceeding theoretical discussions. The literature review is divided into four core sections: queer performance, which conceptualizes performance and anthropological understanding of gender, sexuality, and queerness that inform how I conceptualize queer performance; digital performance and the shifting roles and uses of digital platforms and media; refusal and concepts of trauma; and finally, an interdisciplinary engagement with concepts of visibility, invisibility, and absence through the prisms of queer theory, transgender studies and hauntology.

Chapter three, *Digital Space and Place*, explores how my interlocutors made sense of the ways in which they occupied space online and how they understood their roles and responsibilities in building and safeguarding those spaces. The act of making spaces – or spacemaking – was intertwined with what my interlocutors understood to be transgressive and/or political acts embedded in their artistic practices. In exploring my interlocutors' experiments with community-building and spacemaking online, I argue that my interlocutors' creative processes can be understood as forms of care practices specific to the time, space, and technology of online life during the pandemic. Theorizing care as a process which connects those who provide care and those who need care in order to meet one another's needs and sustain the life of the community, I conceptualize my interlocutors' varied care practices and acts of transgression and refusal in digital performance spaces as care tactics.

Chapter four, *Accessing Digital Togetherness*, outlines some of the barriers to participation in digital life that my interlocutors and their audiences experienced to varying degrees throughout the pandemic, with a particular focus on the elderly, those living in unsafe situations, and those who were experiencing financial precarity. I put these barriers into conversation with the many ways in which the digital pivot did make queer spaces more accessible for other subsections of the queer community, particularly those with disabilities and those who were unable to be physically present in the Village for a myriad of reasons.

In chapter five, *Posting Queer Bodies*, I explore how digital platforms like Twitch and Instagram cracked down on so-called “sexual content” and community standards violations in ways that deliberately policed performances of queerness and transness, regardless of their actual content. Locating these policies and practices within the larger context of FOSTA-SESTA and the digital regulation of sex work and sexual content, I argue that these platforms – which my interlocutors were reliant upon during pandemic restrictions – collapsed the policing of sex work into the policing of transgressive queerness, effectively defining queer content as “sexual” and indecent. The result has been a constructed digital absence of transgressive queer and trans\* bodies across these platforms. I take up those silences throughout this work, asking how digital media platforms shape and/or constrain queer visibility online and whose stories are allowed to be visible and represented. Finally, this chapter explores the impact of this targeted moderation of images of queerness, arguing that it ultimately created new forms of disconnection and virtual absences that made staging transgressive queer bodies a radical political intervention.

Chapter six, *Staging Truth to Power*, engages queer visibility through the lens of artistic practices and storytelling choices that, I argue, constitute a form of refusal. Grounding this in my interlocutors understanding of taking up space in queer bodies as a radical act of resistance, care,

and community-building, this chapter engages with the specific ways in which my interlocutors responded to the expectations placed on them to tell queer stories through specific tropes and narratives of queer trauma. My interlocutors began to refuse those expectations in their work, ultimately moving to center queer joy, which I have argued throughout this dissertation constitutes a deliberate act of care. This chapter situates refusal in relation to my interlocutors' engagements with queer joy, care, and spacemaking, ultimately demonstrating how refusal was understood to be an inherently radical act and how staging non-normative bodies, stories, and expressions became an act of care.

Chapter seven, *Towards Queer Joy*, deals more tangibly with the stakes of representation, exploring the impacts and implications of centering queer joy and decentering trauma. This chapter begins with an exploration of queer joy and silliness, as articulated by the Monarchs. This is followed by a short meditation on responses to centering queer joy, in which I outline why this departure is radical and destabilizing in one sense, but ultimately does not deny or contradict the realities and lived experiences of violence and trauma that queer and trans people experience. This chapter concludes by returning to the question of care through the perspective of Billie and their spacemaking work. Ultimately, this chapter articulates how centering joy works as a care tactic.

In the final chapter, I revisit and summarize the stakes of centering and seeing queer and trans joy, and of its inverse. I follow this with a summary of my key research findings, analyses, and arguments. I then offer some final thoughts on the future of digital queer performance, as articulated by my interlocutors in follow-up interviews as I left the field in 2022. Finally, I examine areas for future research.

## **Chapter 1: Methodology**

### Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of my research methodology. This chapter first introduces my approach to ethnographic research during the pandemic, situating my methods within the anthropological literature on fieldwork. I begin by defining patchwork ethnography and urgent ethnography, two frameworks which shaped my engagements with the field. I then provide an overview of anthropological approaches to digital or virtual ethnography, in which I define the non-digital-centric approach of this research and outline the complexities of ethnographic research across multiple digital spaces. I then move to providing a description of my research methods, including participant observation and conducting ethnographic interviews. I then shift to describing my use of arts-based methods in this research, which I situate within a brief overview of the anthropological literature on visual research methods. Here, I also describe the evolution of my use of drawing and painting, and the theoretical and ethical grounding of these methods. Finally, I unpack the practical and ethical considerations and limitations that shaped this research, paying particular attention to how the pandemic shaped the entries to the field and methods available to me, as well as my own positionality.

### COVID-19 and the Field

Traditionally, ethnographic fieldwork refers to the sustained immersion of a researcher within a real, virtual, or archival field in which the ethnographer engages in the practice of listening and being in situ (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007; DeWalt and DeWalt 2011; Pigg 2013). While ethnography is primarily associated with the discipline of anthropology, ethnography and anthropology are not coterminous. Tim Ingold (2017) highlights the necessity of differentiating between the two; he suggests that conflating the two can result in an anthropologist's voice being

hidden behind those of their interlocutors. For Ingold, anthropology is “a generous, open-minded, comparative, and yet critical inquiry into the conditions and possibilities of human life in the one world we all inhabit” (2017, 22). Ethnography is not a mere tool in the anthropologist’s toolkit, nor is it the ends of anthropology. I understand ethnography as the means through which the anthropologist becomes attuned to the sensibilities and possibilities of the field; ethnographic knowledge emerges from the entangled relationships of the human and nonhuman in our various natural, social, and virtual environments (Culhane 2016). It is the anthropologist’s responsibility, then, to render their ethnographic insights visible and legible and to locate those insights within a larger theoretical and contextual discussion, rather than to simply present ethnographic detail. I am of the position that doing anthropology – that is, to co-facilitate interlocutors’ storytelling *and* to contextualize and theorize with and around those stories – is an inherently political work. Neutral though the fieldworker may endeavour to be, my interlocutors have taught me that witnessing is not a passive act; we become keepers of stories and knowledge and therefore responsible to and for the stories we carry. I understand storytelling to be at the heart of ethnography; to my mind, ethnography is not far removed from the creative arts. As one of my interlocutors, Violet, told me, storytelling is a way of putting truth “into the hands of the people who were experiencing it...the more we tell our stories, the more we shape history and tell what’s happening, and [that] is always political”.

The COVID-19 pandemic amplified existing debates about the nature of “traditional” anthropological fieldwork. For some time, anthropologists have called into questions many disciplinary assumptions about fieldwork, including the construction of the “field”, the arbitrary separations between the “field” and “home”, the masculinist construction of the lone fieldworker, and anthropology’s preoccupation with trauma, injury, and suffering subjects (Berry et al. 2017;

Gunel, Varma, and Watanabe 2020; Robbins 2013). Queer, feminist, and decolonial critiques of anthropology and the neoliberal university have pushed some anthropologists to reimagine fieldwork. Even before the pandemic, family obligations, precarious employment, gender-based and sexualized violence, racialized violence, and other structural factors have made long-term in-person fieldwork difficult or impossible for many scholars. Moreover, the idea of long-term fieldwork is rooted in colonial relations of global power that enabled the forefathers of the discipline to carry out ethnographic research in the former colonies. Contemporarily, ethnographic research is more challenging – practically, ethically, relationally, and politically – due to larger geopolitical transformations. Access to the field is no longer guaranteed, extracting information from marginalized peoples for the sake of research is no longer the norm, and our interlocutors increasingly seek to participate in and shape research on their own terms. The COVID-19 pandemic created further moment of crisis for fieldworkers who could not travel or engage in in-person fieldwork without posing significant risks to their interlocutors' health and safety as well as their own. Across the discipline, anthropologists have adapted to these challenges through online research, multi-sited fieldwork, auto-ethnography, and an assemblage of other innovative methods shaped by the necessity of the moment.

Patchwork ethnography gained traction as an ethnographic method during the pandemic in response to these challenges. Patchwork ethnography is an ethnographic process designed around fragmented field visits to accommodate the growing demands on fieldworkers who may be unable to make uninterrupted long-term field visits. This approach remains committed to maintaining the long-term research commitments and relationships, language proficiency, situated and contextual knowledge, and slow thinking that have characterized traditional fieldwork while acknowledging that the conditions in which we live, work, and produce

knowledge have irrevocably changed (Gunel, Varma, and Watanabe 2020; Faubion 2009; Pigg 2013; Adams, Burke, and Whitmarsh 2014). Patchwork ethnography seeks to expand what we consider acceptable methods of data collection, objects of analysis, and ways of being in and of the field. While the pandemic's disruptive effect on fieldwork popularized patchwork and non-traditional ethnographic methods, these approaches to ethnography have always been relevant to ethnographers who did not have the luxury and/or privilege of being able to uproot to the field for long continuous durations.

Traditional approaches to fieldwork and being “in the field” have always been exclusionary to scholars who are politically, economically, and socially underprivileged. So too have these constructions of the field traditionally enacted barriers on the basis on age, ability, gender, and caregiving or parental responsibilities. While my fieldsite was local, I cannot help but to reflect on how my own struggles with a painful chronic health condition may have impeded by ability to fully immerse physically in the field and how the rigour of my research may have been dismissed in the pre-pandemic era. From a more theoretical lens, I found myself pondering – like Gunel, Varma, and Watanabe (2020) – how this social, political, and economic moment demanded new ways of collecting and analyzing ethnographic data. It was my experience that this moment of crisis and rupture both necessitated fragmented patchwork research methods able to evolve with the ebbs and flows of pandemic life. Moreover, I found that it also created fragments, gaps, and absences in the lives of my research participants and the spaces they occupied.

This research is itself a sort of patchwork. This was not the intent at the outset; rather, the need to engage in patchwork fieldwork materialized in the field for two main reasons. First, there are seasons to performance work in these communities that have busy periods and lulls. The time around the Pride festival, for example, offers a tremendous amount of paid performance work

and the majority of my interlocutors were exceedingly busy in the months of May-June. Likewise, this period was followed by a number of weeks in which many interlocutors took time off so as not to burn out. Being attuned to the temporality of the field necessarily meant that there were periods in which I could not in good conscience burden my interlocutors with additional requests on their time. My interview schedule necessarily ebbed and flowed with pace of work in the community.

Second, as new waves of the pandemic surged and crested, many of my interlocutors moved between in-person and digital performance work as public health regulations on gathering loosened or tightened. For various safety and ethical considerations that I will detail later in this chapter, I could not follow into in-person events. Moreover, as an immunocompromised person with a pre-existing condition living through a pandemic, I had to take some time away from the field to focus on my own health and safety. A sort of patchwork nature emerged naturally as a response to the ever-shifting terrain under the virtual and physical feet of myself and my interlocutors. I began my research in September 2020 – over the course of seventeen months, I took a number of short breaks from fieldwork. Some of these breaks were necessitated by the fact that my interlocutors were themselves taking much needed breaks from their online presence and others necessitated by tending to my own ailments. Of course, these breaks did not completely disconnect me from the field as the field had become so deeply entrenched in my personal social media networks.

Slater (2013) coined the term “urgent ethnography” to refer to ethnographic research conducted in the wake of natural disasters which response primarily to the immediate needs that follow disaster and disruption. While a multi-year pandemic is substantively different from a natural disaster, the structure of how Slater approaches urgent ethnography resonated with my

framing of pandemic ethnography. Slater argues that it is “necessary to have a pre-history of disaster, some backward tracing of players and policy, of technology and adaptability, of geographies and capital, that are linked together in ways that will reveal the trajectory of disaster and the patterns of vulnerability” (2013, 33). That is to say, that moments of intense social disruption like a pandemic cannot be understood in a vacuum, and that the exceptionality of such an event does not disentangle it from local circumstances and histories which in turn impact how the effects of disaster will be experienced.

Slater (2013) also argues that there is an urgency to capturing accounts of everyday life in the immediate aftermath of trauma because our memories fade quickly in post-traumatic situations as we adapt to new realities. Indeed, as pandemic life became normalized, the minute details of events and feelings in the early days, weeks, and months of social isolation started to fade from memory. I am thankful to have some direct accounting, however partial and fragmented, of how my interlocutors experienced their own connections to one another and their art forms in the early waves of COVID-19. Moreover, given the protracted nature of the pandemic and the waves of its effects, I was able to observe how my interlocutors’ thoughts, feelings, priorities, and needs changed and adapted over time.

Thinking about the pandemic in relation to disaster is helpful in so far as it lends a framework through which to digest the internal complexity and far-reaching impact and trauma of that time. During and just after a major disaster, there is typically a period when “social form and fabric have dissolved, and survivors find themselves on their own” (Hoffman 1999, 137). The COVID-19 pandemic was similarly a mass-trauma that had similar effects on social structure and form. For the queer performers with whom I worked, these effects were compounded by the failure of social safety measures to account for their specific circumstances.

Moreover, this dissolution of social fabric in the wake of COVID-19 seems to have exacerbated already divisive political movements like so-called trans-exclusionary radical feminism and other anti-trans\* rights movements as well as reactionary movements against anti-racism and critical race theory. The internal complexity of pandemic politics has resulted in a layering of additional traumas and violence against my interlocutors, some of which may be intentional and others which seem to be the product of that failure of society to adapt successfully and sustainably to this protracted rupture.

In later chapters, I engage the literature on trauma in more depth. However, it is necessary at this point to outline how I and my interlocutors understand and employ the concept of trauma. I understand trauma as a relational event or process which “sheers us off from our expected connections with others, from our perceived social supports, from our basic sense of safety, however locally construed” (Lester 2013, 754). In this sense, trauma can occur at the individual, cultural, and national/international levels. Many of my interlocutors shared experiences of individual traumas over the course of this research, but they also alluded to or spoke directly to collective experiences of trauma shared by other queer and trans\* people, racialized and Indigenous peoples, people with disabilities, and elderly people. Moreover, this work is inextricable from the context of the (inter)national trauma of the COVID-19 pandemic, whose indelible marks are only just beginning to surface. While this dissertation is not about trauma itself, I am concerned here with how trauma plays a role in the formation of subjectivity.

This dissertation is based on digital ethnographic fieldwork. Following from Pink et al. (2015), I understand digital ethnography as starting from the idea that “digital media and technologies are part of the everyday and more spectacular worlds that people inhabit” and taking a non-digital-centric approach to studying relationships between digital and material

worlds. By non-digital-centric, I mean that this project was not designed around being digital; rather, the need to employ digital methods stemmed from an already developed research agenda. Pink et al. (2015) argue that digital ethnography has five distinguishing principles: it accounts for multiplicity, or the multiple ways people engage digital technologies; it is non-digital-centric; it derives from an open-ended design process; it is reflexive; and it is often unorthodox and requires attention to alternative forms of communicating findings.

Building on existing ethnographies of virtual worlds (Nardi 2010; Boellstorff 2015), I adapted the more traditional ethnographic methods of participant-observation and interviews to the digital platforms and communities my interlocutors engaged. Unlike in the cases of Nardi (2010) and Boellstorff (2015), I was not emerged in a singular virtual world, but in a virtual community that co-opted a number of pre-existing social media and livestreaming platforms to build complex digital communities during the COVID-19 pandemic. My fieldwork followed my participants across five main platforms: Zoom, Twitch, YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram. My interlocutors additionally began using Discord to host group conversations in semi-private spaces towards the end of my fieldwork. My research participants included queer performers of all genres, including drag and gender performers, cabaret and burlesque artists, theatre performers and playwrights, television stars and producers, and venue operators and staff. My participants all worked with venues and producers in Toronto, though some temporarily or permanently left the city proper during the pandemic for varying reasons. While my interlocutors and I were geographically located in the same area, I consider this research to be multi-sited ethnography. By this I mean that it is an attempt to do what Marcus (1995) calls mapping the terrain of a system through multiple distinct (digital) locations. Marcus (1995) identifies a number of modes or techniques through which ethnographers define their object of study; in this case, I am

following the people (my interlocutors), following the story (navigating the digital shift and pandemic realities), and following the conflict (interpersonal and systemic) across distinct digital spaces and periods of time.

As Boellstorff (2015) notes, those who write about digital spaces and virtual worlds are often tempted to emphasize sensational events. He writes:

“extraordinary events ... paint a misleading picture of [virtual] culture. Ethnographers are not oblivious to the newsworthy or the extraordinary, but find that culture is lived out in the mundane and the ordinary. The goal is to find methods attuned to the banal dimensions of human life, what Pierre Bourdieu termed the ‘habitus’: ‘a subjective but not individual system of internalized structures, schemes of perception, conception, and action’ (Bourdieu 1977:86).” (2015, 77).

In order to find that mundane, I had to become familiar with a number of platforms, their interfaces, their functions, their drawbacks, and how they were utilized by my interlocutors. The ways in which my participants communicated and interacted with one another differed on each platform because each platform’s unique features and designs allowed for different modes of communication and connection. The interface design of Instagram Live and Facebook Live, for example, enabled live chats and emoji reactions on live video feeds in addition to the direct messaging and social media feeds that were the core of these platforms. Twitch, on the other hand, was not a social media site; it enabled live chats and reactions to live video feeds and the ability to send direct messages (called “whispers”) if you were logged into an account, but did not support the creation of elaborate profiles and groups that one found on the social networks. Instagram, Facebook, and Twitch all employed monitoring algorithms on live video feeds that censored specific language, while Twitch also enabled streamers to set their own list of “banned words” in their live chats. These chats were publicly accessible. To have private, unmoderated and uncensored conversations, or to share content that was copyrighted or would be flagged as

violating community standards or terms of service, my interlocutors had to simultaneously use other messaging platforms like Discord.

Participant observation was a core method in this research. Anthropological research methods require ethnographers to move beyond interviews and deep literature reviews and to focus on long-term immersion into the world of our interlocutors, which we term participant observation. This immersion allows the researcher to gather detailed knowledge and analysis of the everyday environments and social interactions of our participants (Boellstorff 2015). As Boellstorff (2015) argues, while anthropologists are also concerned by the conscious products, and I would add conscious production, of culture, they prioritize the context of the everyday. In a typical week, I attended live performances on four to six evenings, and less frequently on weekend afternoons. These performances typically ran about two hours each, and I often would attend multiple back-to-back shows each night. As I was already familiar with the Church-Wellesley Village and Queer West performance scenes prior to the pandemic, I had little trouble connecting with performers and community institutions on social media at the outset of my fieldwork. In making these connections, I built up a social network of artists and producers to follow and watch. I then assumed the role of an audience member, taking my cues from these performers and following them as they moved between platforms throughout the pandemic. In cultivating this network, I discovered specific houses and channels on Twitch and other platforms and followed their performance schedules. When they would platform other artists, I would also follow those artists on social media and add their performances to my calendar. Moreover, the artists with whom I was networked would often promote special events or one-off performances to their audience(s). I decided which performances to attend largely through following the chatter amongst other

audience members and performers, and often sought advice from my interlocutors as to whose work I should be following.

The majority of the shows I attended were free livestreams that encouraged tipping, which I routinely engaged in. I less frequently attended ticketed special events that charged an entrance fee. The livestream performances that I attended were typically weekly or bi-weekly shows hosted on a handful of Twitch channels or the social media or Zoom accounts of venues or individual performers. The weekly and bi-weekly shows amassed regular audiences over the course of the pandemic and often had overlapping guests and performers, meaning that a moderately sized but vocal and enthusiastic community formed around these shows. Moreover, on all platforms, live chat boxes were enabled and allowed audience members and performers to talk to one another. Performers would often read comments while livestreaming and call out responses to questions or greet audience members whose handle they recognized, creating a sense of connection and interactivity that was reminiscent of how performers would interact with audience members at in-person shows. Even in the case of theatrical performances in which a fourth wall was maintained or ad-libbing discouraged, directors, producers, and off-screen cast members would similarly participate in live chats. Participant observation necessarily meant spending a great deal of time watching multi-hour livestream, hanging out in chats, and interacting with performers and audience members through each platform's specific digital interfaces. These are, admittedly, activities I might have been doing anyways as a regular member of the audience and queer arts community. Like Boellstorff (2015), I contend that the mixing of "fun and games" and a research agenda are not antithetical but rather a core part of doing anthropology.

Over the course of approximately seventeen months, I conducted semi-structured interviews with twenty-two participants. These interviews were conducted virtually on Zoom. As the pandemic restrictions changed over the course of the project, I would conduct multiple follow-up interviews with interlocutors, revisiting their thoughts about digital performance practices and digital community building. In these follow-up interviews and in informal conversations throughout 2021, changes my interlocutors were able to articulate how their views, experiences, and hopes for the future of digital performance and community-building had changed. Of these twenty-two interlocutors, fourteen identified their performance practices as being drag or gender performance; thirteen identified their performance practices as cabaret, burlesque, draglesque or other variations of this performance style; six identified their work as performance art; seven theatre performers, producers and playwrights; five had done some work in television; two were also podcasters; and eight worked in venues as directors, producers, or staff. Seventeen has done some type of production or curation work during the pandemic. There were overlap between these categories, with some participants occupying multiple roles or having wide ranging and varying performance practices. All interviews were conducted over the teleconferencing platform Zoom; using Zoom enabled me to see my participants and build rapport more easily than in written messages or phone calls while still maintaining the technological distance that pandemic restrictions required. Some participants elected not to turn on their cameras during their interview(s) for various reasons, including practical and logistical reasons – i.e. being in transit between locations and using the Zoom app on their phone or calling into Zoom from their phone line – and anxieties related to appearance and camera-readiness. I additionally conducted follow-up interviews with the majority of my participants as we entered new stages of the pandemic, either over Zoom or through the exchanging of emails or direct messages on Instagram.

I initially approached interviews with structured questions, which ultimately proved to impede the conversations my interlocutors wanted to have in this time; for many of them, opportunities to talk openly and confidentially about how they were experiencing the pandemic as an artist, person, and community-member were not abundantly available. After three initial interviews, I modified my approach; instead of using a firm list of questions, I would begin with standard establishing questions before posing open-ended conversation starters about pandemic experiences. These conversations became more directed and driven by my interlocutors, which was both extremely generative as well as helpful in building relationships and rapport. In opening up that space, my interlocutors were more free to identify their actual concerns to me, some of which were already apparent and others pertaining to insider gossip and information to which I otherwise would not have been privy. I allowed my interlocutors to drive the direction of my research in this way; the concerns they identified supplanted the concerns I was originally most interested in studying. The conversational tone of these interviews also gave my interlocutors a space to vent about goings on in the community with anonymity and without consequence. The knowledge that I both would not and could not reveal what they had said about certain promoters, bookers, or venues gave many participants the permission to be genuinely honest and air grievances in a way they would not be publicly. In many ways, interviews became a time for “spilling tea”.<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, the conversational narrative of these interviews allowed participants to tell stories and go on tangents in ways that enabled them to shape larger narratives about themselves and their lives. Similar to how anthropologists employing a life history method might examine the

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<sup>3</sup> Now a more mainstream slang term, spilling tea comes from queer ballroom culture. Tea refers to gossip or inside information, while spilling refers to the sharing of this information.

narratives a participant chooses to construct about themselves, and which details they decide to include or omit, examining the narrative structures and themes my interlocutors wove into their stories was ultimately revealing. The depth of these interviews meant that they often became emotionally-charged spaces – hysterical laughter, existential exasperation, and crying were common. There was a genuine willingness to be incredibly vulnerable in initial meetings that I did not anticipate; I had expected that more long-term relationship building would be necessary to reach these levels of trust and disclosure. I attribute some of this openness to the isolation of the pandemic and the multitude of pressures my interlocutors were under. Many interlocutors revealed to me that I was the only outlet they had for many of these thoughts and feelings, and/or that I was the only person who had asked about their wellbeing in this way. In a way, this facilitated the building of rapport and enabled continued conversations and follow-up interviews, but the act of witnessing and holding the disclosures and trauma of many of my participants was at times taxing and emotionally exhausting.

### Arts-Based Ethnographic Methods

This research employed arts-based practices – namely drawing, painting, and multimedia art forms – as ethnographic methods. During my fieldwork, I sketched gesture and line drawings in my notebooks. I used gesture drawings to quickly capture series of movements and their affective dimensions, whereas I used line drawings to create a rough rendering of a subject or scene. After a performance or conversation I found particularly moving, I would draw, paint, collage, or use other mediums to create more elaborate scenes – these pieces were part of a reflexive process in which I attempted to render visual representations of the concepts or ideas my interlocutors were engaging, or the thematic or affective elements of the field. Some of these

pieces turned into larger art pieces around specific issues my interlocutors were most concerned by.

Sarah Pink (2011) argues that visual research methods can be broadly classified in three categories: making visual representations, examining pre-existing visual representations, and collaborative production of visual representations. I focused primarily on making visual representations and examining the pre-existing visual representations that my interlocutors produced in their own artistic practices. The process of drawing, painting, collaging, as well as the practice of sitting before an easel and attempting to render a familiar image “brings home how much is forgotten when writing and talking dominate methodology” (Hurdley et al. 2017, 751). Attempting to capture movement, affect, and specificity through “linear movement that leaves an impression or trace of one kind or another” (Ingold 2011, 2) is an attempt to attune anthropology to the multivalent complexities of the field and of life. In becoming a practitioner of drawing, painting, and multimedia art forms, I attuned myself to the “multivalent, ambiguous modalities of exercising eyes, hand, pen, and paper” (Hurdley et al. 2017, 749). Pink (2011) also argues that there is no simple way to define what makes an image, text or piece of knowledge “ethnographic”; rather, the ethnographic is defined through interpretation and context. Within the context of working with and among artists of varying mediums and genres, I contend that the making and interpretation of art is an inherently ethnographic process.

*Figure 2: A gesture drawing of a play about physical distancing that was staged in a public outdoor location and livestreamed, summer 2020.*



The above gesture drawing illustrates a series of choreographed movements two actors undertake in this outdoor and livestreamed play about physical distancing. This play was put on in conjunction with an arts festival that involved several of my interlocutors in the summer of 2020. The drawing illustrates two actors slowly sliding towards each other on a long bench, reaching to touch one another. As they touch, both enter a panic and flee from the bench, performing a series of frenzied movements clutching at their own bodies and miming displays of agony and pain.

I began line and gesture drawing in the early days of my fieldwork. Within a few weeks, I began sketching my interlocutors with pencil or pen into my notebooks. Drawing began to supplement the more traditional role of photography; Sarah Pink (2011) describes how photography, while appropriate for some research and a more standard tool of ethnographers, may not always be a practical method and may raise significant ethical issues in certain fieldsites. I found drawing to be a more appropriate method than photography for a number of reasons. Firstly, drawing is a process of investigation in and of itself. As Andrew Causey notes, this process is:

“one where the investigator/drawer researchers a problem up to its known limits, purposefully looks at this data from new perspectives, searching for analogic insights, seeks out connections and patterns in the shaped and spaces that comprise the problem, envisions parts of the problem that lay deep in shadows by extrapolating from the parts that are sufficiently lighted to be seen, and finally examines the whole to find the structure of unity.” (2017, 12)

Much of how we document fieldwork requires a translation from the visual field to a verbal code; visual mediums enable a more direct documentation of what we see that requires less of this translation. Causey (2017) is particularly fixated on the act of translation – the ways in which ethnographers encode the visual into writing is a very particular way of seeing and recording. Likewise, visual methods are ways of seeing and recording that are inherently different from writing. The very act of drawing requires us to see or to gaze differently – when you look at a scene or an object with the intent to draw, you are seeing from a very different perspective. The process of drawing requires us to use different skills in how we interpret stimulus around them. Moreover, Causey (2017) argues that were drawing requires an active sensorial engagement with the field, photography often lends itself to “not-seeing” or a “passive scanning or mere looking – a meandering gaze”. That is not to say that either drawing or photography are inherently superior methods, rather that they construct different kinds of ethnographic knowledge and attune us differently to our surroundings in the field.

Moreover, photography was not a practical method for capturing events occurring on a phone or computer screen; photographing screens is very difficult and results in blurred and often unintelligible images. But more to the point, it was not the true-to-life representation of the screen I was interested in capturing, but rather the goings-on happening within it. There were also ethical considerations. The community in which I worked is very small and interconnected and I had promised my interlocutors a certain amount of anonymity. There was no way that I could photograph my interlocutors without revealing identities. Drawing, on the other hand,

enabled me to capture images of my interlocutors while maintaining the artistic license to obscure identifying features. I was less concerned with drawing true-to-life representations of my interlocutors than capturing their affective qualities. Likewise, while I could not take videos or photographs of live performances, I could sketch and gesture draw moments that struck me rather than trying to translate the affect of a moment to a clinical written description. Moreover, arts practices enabled me to create visual representations of the ideas my interlocutors were sharing. In particular, my interlocutors were concerned with issue of access and visibility in digital spaces; the problems they described (and which will be discussed in several chapters of this dissertation) were inherently structural and manifested often as absences of certain constituencies from certain digital spaces. I began to use drawing, painting, and other mediums to visually represent lack and absence, to render absence visible. Drawing and painting elaborate scenes at the end of the day became a mode of reflexive thinking and came to complement written reflections in my notebooks.

My concerns about the ethical sensibilities of ethnographic images and visual modes of storytelling builds on the work of John L. Jackson (2016; 2018). The academy emphasizes the primacy of written text; one aim of this research was to include non-textual representations of my interlocutors' lives. Anthropologists have long argued that culture and meaning are unphotographable, that images can only capture so much and must be accompanied by the ethnographer's interpretation to counter what Geertz saw as the thinness of the camera (Jackson 2016). Jackson (2016) pushes back against these assumptions, arguing that the ethnographic image is not thin, but rather it is "undomesticably thick". Images – whether they are filmic, photographic, or artistically rendered – certainly privilege what the director, photographer, or artist wants you the viewer to see, but images are uncontrollable. The viewer will see whatever

they will and cracks and crevices in the scene will convey things that were not intended for viewing; the ethnographic image is unruly. Barthes (1981) understands the image to be comprised of the studium, which encompasses all of the elements of an image and the intention of the person who made it, and the punctum, or the part of the image that “pricks” the viewer. One cannot create a punctum; the punctum emerges in how a viewer interfaces with an image and decodes its meaning, regardless of authorial intent (Hall 1999). Even in my own artistic renderings of the field, I have no authority over how someone views and decodes these images.

*Figure 3: A drawing from my fieldnotes of Gabriel performing on Zoom.*



This drawing of Gabriel is taken from my fieldnotes. In this image, Gabriel is performing a lip sync to an ABBA song on Zoom using live effects. Using a custom angled kaleidoscope filter on Zoom, Gabriel’s image is slightly distorted as he moves across the screen, with kaleidoscopic traces of his face and hair following behind him.

While Jackson, Hall, and Barthes are talking about filmic and photographic images, their arguments are crucial to how I conceptualize ethnographic multi-modality. Images come with representational politics; in thinking multi-modally, the ethnographer becomes caught up in the sensibilities that Black feminist ethnographers like Zora Neale Hurston and others have been

concerned with for decades, namely how best to (re)present people in their own voices. As John L. Jackson (2016) says in advocating for multimodal anthropology, formal academic writing is not “the only proper register to use if you are talking honestly about people’s social worlds”. It is therefore my intention in privileging art and images in this dissertation to lessen the centrality of the text and to unsettle my own authority and control as an ethnographer, to present the voices, concerns, and ideas of my interlocutors dynamically and with their own unwieldy authority.

Keeping with the notion of honesty about people’s social worlds, it is important to note that art is not devoid of issues of authority, power, and who is empowered to produce art. As with any modality, it is incumbent on me to reflect on the fact that my work likely possesses its own limitations. While I have endeavoured to represent my interlocutors’ ideas and concerns artistically and have done so through reflective engagements with them, this work is still in my voice and my hand, making it an imperfect and subjective representation. Ultimately, the ethnographic art in this dissertation are my imaginings rendered through my hand and cannot be separated from my own experience of the field, the pandemic, my interlocutors, and my relationships to my interlocutors.

### Practical and Ethical Considerations

Over the course of this fieldwork, I attended live performances and workshops, but I also viewed a number of recordings of performances. In total, I attended approximately 117 live performances, some of which were completely live, some of which blended live feeds and pre-recorded elements, and some of which were live broadcasts of pre-recorded media. I also viewed 58 recordings of performances that I was unable to attend live. The majority of recorded performances I watched had been staged between March-August 2020, in the first wave and partial re-opening of the COVID-19 pandemic, prior to the start of my fieldwork in September.

These recordings were publicly available on Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram and captured the initial move to digital performance practices. As such, they were incredibly important research materials, documenting the immediate response to pandemic lockdowns and how the community adapted over those initial months. In a sense, these recordings constituted an archive; the social media platforms for individual performers or venues hosted recordings of *selected* performances. There is an element of curation to these digital collections, either at the discretion of the performers themselves or at the discretion of the hosting venue. By and large, choices around recordings seemed to be made not as a value judgment on the worth of a particular performance but around what content was permissible under each platform's community standards.

I am a queer person living in Toronto and have pre-established ties to the queer arts community and the Church-Wellesley Village. Anthropologists often write about their entry “into the field” as a distinct event occurring when the researcher sets foot in their field site. In my case, this entry was less a moment and more of a process as these connections pre-dated the imagining of this research question or the receiving of ethics approval. Having already known the community to an extent, I was mindful upon beginning fieldwork that I was a white middle-class queer person entering sometimes contested spaces in the midst of a fraught political moment. White middle-class queer people have taken up a disproportionate and dominant amount of space in the Village and this has historically and contemporaneously served to further marginalize racialized queer people. I therefore approached this research reflexively, also considering how my presence contributed to or encroached upon queer spaces. Moreover, it was always my position that this research ought to elevate and platform the voices, stories, and performances of the always-already most marginalized members of our community. Having these pre-existing connections to the field meant that I simultaneously occupied the positions of insider and

outsider. Inevitably, occupying these dual identities of community member and researcher, the direction and politics of this research were shaped by my own affectual and emotions relations to the field, to digital life, and to the challenges my interlocutors faced in digital spaces (Reger 2001).

Anger and exhaustion shaped a significant portion of my early fieldwork; anger at the ways in which racialized queer people had been dispossessed by institutions within the Village over the course of 2020, and exhaustion in response to the pandemic. But exhaustion was a luxury that many of my interlocutors could not afford, particularly given that many of them did not qualify for the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) and were constantly – at times desperately – hustling to scrape together an income through each wave of the pandemic. I became uncomfortably self-aware of my relative financial security at the time. Moreover, I found myself constantly cycling through similar emotional states to my interlocutors throughout these various stages of reopening and restriction: anger, exhaustion, defeat, and then an impetus to resistance and activism. By resistance, I do not mean against public health measures, but against the continuous drudge of anti-Black, anti-Indigenous, ageist, and transphobic political rhetoric that characterized 2020-2021. Through my interlocutors, I learned to continuously recenter that refusal or resistance, to work towards queer joy, and move away from trauma.

The methods, form, and output of this research was greatly shaped by the ethical necessities of this time. Firstly, this research could not involve any in-person elements due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Even in the periods where public health restrictions were lifted and venues began to re-open, the University's policy did not allow for the resumption of in-person research. Moreover, my own status as an immunocompromised individual meant that I made a deliberate choice to not explore possibilities for in-person research during re-opening phases. A number of

my research participants, likewise, had their own respective health concerns or risk factors and were hesitant to return to in-person events. Second, I came into the field with activist-researcher or activist-anthropologist intentions; by that, I mean “a method through which we affirm a political alignment with [a group] ... and allow dialogue with them to shape [the ethnographic process]” (Hale 2006, 97). My alignment and solidarity with my interlocutors necessarily meant letting them continuously reshape my research according to what issues they considered pressing and necessary of investigation. Third, I had to balance anonymity with issues of representation. This community is relatively small, hyperconnected, and insular – providing anonymity to participants necessarily meant getting creative. As I have outlined above, this was one motivation for the use of drawing and other arts-based methods. Likewise, being concerned with the ethnographic sensibilities of representation and particularly attuned to the silences or absences in digital space that my interlocutors identified, I became transfixed by the problem of representing absence or lack in ways that rendered them tangible and visible. It is, in part, an ethical stance around representation that led me to employ arts-based methods to visually represent many of the intangible aspects of this fieldwork by rendering them materially visible.

### Conclusion

This research followed the trajectory of digital performance practices through seventeen months of digital fieldwork, participant-observation, and extensive interviews between July 2020 and January 2022. As part of this fieldwork, I followed my interlocutors across multiple platforms, from their early experiments with digital performance on Facebook, Instagram, and Zoom, to their attempts to build public digital communities through performance spaces on Twitch, and finally to their attempts to create private performance and community spaces on Discord. I conducted a series of semi-structured interviews with twenty-two interlocutors over

Zoom throughout this time. As the pandemic restrictions changed over the course of the project, I conducted multiple follow-up interviews with interlocutors, revisiting their thoughts about digital performance practices and digital community building. In these follow-up interviews and in informal conversations throughout 2021, changes my interlocutors were able to articulate how their views, experiences, and hopes for the future of digital performance and community-building had changed.

This research employed arts-based practices – namely drawing, painting, and multimedia art forms – as ethnographic methods. During my fieldwork, I sketched gesture and line drawings in my notebooks. I used gesture drawings to quickly capture series of movements and their affective dimensions, whereas I used line drawings to create a rough rendering of a subject or scene. After a performance or conversation I found particularly moving, I would draw, paint, collage, or use other mediums to create more elaborate scenes – these pieces were part of a reflexive process in which I attempted to render visual representations of the concepts or ideas my interlocutors were engaging, or the thematic or affective elements of the field. Some of these pieces turned into larger art pieces around specific issues my interlocutors were concerned about. These artistic methods enabled the visual representation of the absences and silences which came to characterize much of my interlocutors’ virtual worlds in this time. Moreover, they also visually represented my own experiences and imaginings of those absences and silences and are coloured by the lens I have brought to them.

This chapter further positioned this fieldwork within the context of the pandemic and its unique methodological and ethical challenges. I position this research as a kind of urgent ethnography, outlining how the direction of this research responded to a moment of social rupture and the community’s needs in the wake of emergency. Moreover, urgent ethnography

recognizes that in the immediate aftermath of trauma, there is an urgency to capture accounts of everyday life before memories fade. This research enabled me to capture some direct accounting of how my interlocutors experienced the pandemic, their relationships to one another, and their shifting feelings, thoughts, priorities, and needs throughout various waves of the pandemic.

This work should also be understood in relation to patchwork ethnography, or a process designed around fragmented field visits. This research is a patchwork out of necessity, shaped by the realities of the pandemic and my interlocutors' lives. As various waves of the pandemic allowed for different attempts at in-person performances, I was constrained in my ability to follow my interlocutors into in-person spaces, resulting in short breaks from my fieldwork. Moreover, my interlocutors' performance work came in seasons, with many of my interlocutors taking breaks following particularly busy periods like Pride. Being attuned to the temporality of the field necessarily meant that my research practices followed these ebbs and flows and went through its own lulls.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of the theoretical frameworks that inform and underlie this dissertation. This chapter is divided into four sections: queer performance, digital performance and media, refusal and trauma, and visibility and absence. The section on queer performance locates my own conceptualization of performance and queerness within the anthropological literature on performance, gender, and sexuality, before finally weaving these concepts together to inform my definition of queer performance. The section on digital performance and media provides an overview of anthropological and interdisciplinary engagements with digital media and live performance, placing particular emphasis on the shifting roles and uses of digital platforms and media across the literature. The third section weaves together the anthropological literature on refusal and interdisciplinary literature on trauma, which I contend should be understood together in the context of this dissertation. The final section is an interdisciplinary engagement with concepts of visibility, invisibility, and absence through the lens of queer theory, transgender theory, and hauntology.

### Queering Performance

Performance can be understood as a broad spectrum of activities intentionally staged for an audience (Schechner 2016). This differs from the related concept of performativity, which draws primarily on Goffman's (1959) theorization of the presentation of the self in everyday life and on speech-act theory, particularly Austin's (1975) theory of performative speech and Butler's (1990a, 1990b) ensuing theory of gender performativity. While theatrical language is often employed in studying performance, performance is not coterminous with theatre. Theatre is a limited term for a specific kind of spectatorial participation in a staged event (Beeman 1993),

whereas performance encompasses a variety of mediums and behaviours that can be repeated, rehearsed, and recreated and which may or may not reference theatricality (Schechner 2016; Roach 2013). Moreover, performance epitomizes a state of liminality of in-betweenness in that it creates possibilities for participants to co-determine the actions and behaviours of others. Participants – performers and audience members alike – exist in a state between co-determining the course of a given performance and being determined by the scriptedness of a performance (Fischer-Lichte 2016). In that sense, we can theorize performance as something that arises out of the encounter between performer and spectator, who negotiate and regulate one another's reactions and responses (Fischer-Lichte 2016). If performance emerges from an encounter between two different groups, then performance is not merely aesthetic, but a social and political negotiation of power (Fischer-Lichte 2016). It is this idea that performance is a site of social and political negotiation that I take up in this work.

While it is important to delineate that performance differs from performativity, notions of performativity are deeply embedded in how the anthropological literature understands gendered performances. Performativity draws on Goffman (1959) and Mauss's (1973[1935]) understandings of movements, gestures, and expressions as enactments of the social, as well as speech-act theory. In essence, performativity is concerned with the authoritative power of language that constructs or affects reality; put differently, as Butler (1993) argues, the performative produces what it names and is therefore a form of discursive power producing discursive effects. Gender, according to Butler's theory of gender performativity, is constituted through the stylized repetition of acts, gestures, and enactments, which are performative in that the gender identities they express are constructed and sustained through discursive means (Butler 1990a). Performativity is not a singular act, but rather a reiterative and citational discursive

practice.<sup>4</sup> Queer theorists have taken this up to explore how discursive regimes come to produce and affect reality, with scholars like Sedgwick (2003) and Murray (2002) delineating between forms of performatives and their affects. Murray (2002) argues that performatives can be privileged in that they are widely articulated, circulated, and supported by groups with the means to broadcast them and therefore are held as normative, or they can be disruptive in that they challenge those normative privileged performatives. Murray (2002) uses the term normative here rather than hegemonic, arguing that the relations of power that conceptually underlie Gramsci's (1971) traditional theorization of hegemony do not reflect the complex and multiple constitutions of the social relation which constitute gender performativity.

This dissertation is informed by two analytical frameworks for conceptualizing of gender and sexuality: embodiment and queer phenomenology. Embodiment is what "locates us in the world" and puts us in a "spatio-temporal relation with other beings and [gives] us a standpoint, literally, from which to perceive them" (Crossley 2007, 82). Space and place shape our embodied experiences; it is through the body that we make meaning of the world, or, put differently "being-in-the-world means being placed" (Trigg 2012, 4). In thinking about gender and sexuality beyond the emphasis on language, embodiment attends to how "bodies 'know' the moves and act their place in the choreography of the event" (Youdell and Armstrong 2011, 146). In focusing on embodiment, we consider the movements, orientations, and positionings of queer bodies themselves and the intra-actions between social actors that produce good bodies and problem

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<sup>4</sup> Trans\*, non-binary, genderfluid, and genderqueer genders map less neatly onto this understanding of gender performativity than cisgenderism does. Transgender theory has largely been divided into two opposing camps, for example: the traditional wrong-body account, and the beyond-the-binary vision. The wrong-body account proposes that gender is innate and determines one's real sex, whereas the latter camp's deconstruction of gender and sex categories at all emerged from the transgender politics of the 1990s (Gilbert 2018). Butler's work rests on the notion that "true" gender does not exist but is rather a social construct, which conceptually and epistemologically undermines some trans\* peoples' understandings and experiences of their "real" gender (Gilbert 2018).

bodies (Slater, Jones, and Procter 2018). Queer embodiment is deeply intertwined with affect and emotion; Ahmed (2004) argues that emotions play crucial role in how individual and collective bodies are coded and signified. In dealing with queer bodies, in particular, the ways in which they move through and interact with the world are imbued with emotional responses – and those responses, particularly those which emerge from the ether of ambiguity – are inextricable from how and when queer bodies are perceived as acceptable or threatening.

I am partial to Ahmed's (2006) phenomenological approach to theorizing sexuality and gender. Ahmed posits that sexuality is an orientation, meaning that bodies become oriented by how they take up time and space. In this sense, queer is a spatial term which then becomes a sexual term for a sexuality that does not follow a straight line. If sexual orientation is something that one has, a queer body becomes defined by the direction of their desires. Following a Butlerian logic, bodies take shape through the repetition of some gestures and the refutation of others; heterosexual genders are formed through the renunciation of homosexuality which produces a domain of heterosexual objects which are appropriate love objects and simultaneously produces a field of objects that are not permissible to desire (Butler 1997). This repetition and refutation orient the body in particular directions and away from others (Ahmed 2006). For Ahmed, orientation shapes what bodies do in the same way that compulsory heterosexuality does for other theorists; in desiring certain objects, some paths and futures are closed off and others are made available. Where heterosexuality imagines one's futurity in reproductive terms, queer life limits one's futurity in this sense and queer life emerges as a sort of deviant and/or failure in straight culture (Ahmed 2006). Queerness, then, is about how we negotiate and perform the flows and directions of desire between bodies, objects, and places (Dickinson et al. 2018; Campbell and Farrier 2016).

Building on Ahmed's (2006) phenomenological understanding of queerness as orientation, those who follow an acceptable direction or orientation may be understood as conforming to heteronormativity or homonormativity. Building on Rich (1983), Foucault (1978), Rubin (1984), and others, heteronormativity can be defined as "social, cultural, and institutionalized meanings and practices that systematically confer privilege in the forms of status, authority, and material resources on heterosexual people who conform to societal norms and expectations for living a 'good life'" (Schippers 2016, 7). The expectations of heteronormativity include monogamy, marriage between one man and one woman, a nuclear family formation with dependent children, and active participation in capitalism. This functions as a regime of normalcy, privileging those who embody and adhere to these norms and systematically disadvantaging those who contest them (Schippers 2016). This regulatory regime is built upon networks and systems of social beliefs that have been termed compulsory heterosexuality and compulsory monogamy. Compulsory heterosexuality, as theorized by Rich (1983), refers to a system of social beliefs, customs, and practices that compel women into relationships with men, systematically ensuring men's access to and ownership of women's bodies, labour, and children. Likewise, compulsory monogamy and its emphasis on patriarchal marriage serves to legitimize, support, and naturalize a hegemonic relationship between men/masculinity and women/femininity which upholds heteromale privilege (Schippers 2016). Compulsory heterosexuality and compulsory monogamy are mutually supporting systems which work to render queerness and queer relationship or family formations perverse, immoral, and a threat to normal relationships, families, and domestic and capitalist formations. Coming back to Ahmed (2006), to be in line with socially normative and acceptable directions, one must orient themselves within these regimes of normativity.

The reward for being oriented towards and within normativity is sexual citizenship. What sexual citizenship entails varies across the interdisciplinary literature. For some, sexual citizenship is materially constructed and primarily about the right to participate in capitalist consumption (Evans 1993) and to access capital and credit (Bell and Binnie 2000). For others, sexual citizenship is a framework for theorising the granting or denial of legal rights to social groups on the basis of sexuality (Richardson 2000). Others have emphasized how this exclusion on the basis of sexuality reflects and reinforces the longstanding centrality of marriage, parenthood, and military service as key foundations of the liberal regime of modern citizenship (Pateman 1988; Richardson 2017). Some scholars, still, prefer the term “intimate citizenship” as it allows for a consideration of areas of personal and domestic life that are not typically viewed as “sexual” (Olesky 2009; Plummer 2005). I am partial to the term sexual citizenship to refer specifically to the construction of “good” queer subjects – those who fall within what Gayle Rubin (1984) calls the “charmed circle” of sexual and gendered normalcy – who are recognized as moral and deserving citizens, and the construction of “bad” queer subjects who do not or will not conform to these standards and who come to be punished or cast out for these transgressions. The construction of the good and bad queer subject is of particular relevance to chapters five and six of this dissertation. As I will outline in proceeding chapters, the charmed circle of sexual and gendered normalcy is deeply engrained not only in normative and dominant narratives of queerness, but in the ways in which the participation of queer and trans people in public life is policed.

With this conceptualization of queerness in mind, let’s return to performance. I consider performance to be an actualization of ideas and worlding processes; as a site of inquiry, staged performances are generative sites where hegemonic or counterhegemonic ideas and narratives

about queerness emerge, are actualized, (re)produced, felt, imagined, and negotiated or contested, both intentionally and unintentionally. In the context of my research, performance can also be understood as a “technology of resistance...deployed as a means to speak back to power through the performing arts in overt, covert, or subtle ways” (Callier 2020, 353). My interlocutors use performance as a tool to express and give name to their own lived experiences and those of their communities, with some wielding that tool to imagine and birth a new liberatory world. This is not new, but rather is how marginalized communities, particularly racialized queer communities, have historically taken up the performing arts (Hamera and Conquergood 2006; hooks 1990; hooks 1995; Madison and Hamera 2006). Queer performance – particularly in this moment in time – sits at the intersection of queer political life and queer art, fueling and invigorating a particular queer politics of resistance. Following from bell hooks (1995), we can understand queer performance as operating both as culture building, on the one hand, and on the other operating out of a necessity for survival. Performance offers a potentially liberatory space in which marginalized communities are able to transgress and unmake boundaries and binaries meant to dehumanize and eradicate their experiences and existences; it is within that space, hooks (1995) argues, that a liberatory consciousness is born, shaped, practiced, and passed on.

My conceptualization of queer performance builds on Leslie Hill’s (2000) theorization of performance art. Hill argues that “necessity is the mother of invention. Likewise, social prejudice, political oppression, and negative stereotypes seem to be surrogates of performance art...performance grows thicker and faster in the margins and cracks of society” (2000, 153). Hill, focusing on the political and performative actions of the suffragettes movement, argues that when various forms of performance art emerged in the popular imaginary, they did so in

opposition to the fine art or gallery art which was housed in and supported by institutional spaces. Hill sees these artforms not as a vocation one decided to undertake, but rather as the only form of art marginalized communities could access because they were excluded from institutional spaces like theatres, galleries, and museums. Performance art, as Hill (2000) understands it, emerges from necessity to carve out a space for the existence of marginalized communities. Looking at feminist movements as a locus point for this kind of emancipatory performance, Hill argues that “artists have always promoted, questioned, or opposed the various cultural hegemonies within which they work, whether consciously or unconsciously, but the suffrage movement was the first in British history to systematically organize the arts on a massive scale into a political sword and shield...it was also powerfully performative” (2000, 153). An inherently political performance art emerged from the necessities of the failure of peaceful protest to secure (white) women the right to vote in the United Kingdom, birthing from necessity a “new hybrid of politics and performance, a more visceral, uncompromising, iconoclastic, hard-hitting, in-your-face style of performance” (Hill 2000, 155). I see many iterations of queer performance as similarly carving out a space for existence.

Performance theory offers a paradigm for understanding queer ideas communicated through staged performances and for taking seriously performances of sexual subjectivities that may otherwise be dismissed (Cregan 2009). If queerness is about the negotiation and performance of desire between bodies that form and follow different lines of sexual and social attachment, then queer performance remains indelibly rooted in the body and its sexual subjectivities (Ahmed 2006; Dickinson et al. 2018; Cregan 2009). One example of this is anthropological engagements with camp, a performance style that transgresses the limits of the normal and emphasizes an over-the-top, larger-than-life aesthetic. In the 1960s, camp was

theorized as an aesthetic position that relies on and reinforces symmetries and gender opposition (Sontag 1964; Conrad 2009); in the 1970s, camp was revisited as an exercise in homosexual taste and existence in Newton's seminal work *Mother Camp* (1979). Following the popularization of Butler's theory of gender performativity, camp was once again retheorized as indicative of an over-determined identity formation. But more recently, anthropologists – informed by the intersections of contemporary queer theory and performance theory – have theorized camp as a distinct queer phenomenon of embodiment rather an aesthetic style or choice. Rather than a citational reiteration of a particular form of femininity as Butler understood it, camp is a paradoxical response of marginalized queer bodies to their marginal status by preserving and reclaiming it through performance (Conrad 2009). And it is deeply political; camp affords queer artists the potential to both rehearse and rehash constitutive reiterations of individual and collective identities while also resisting hegemonic productions of “bodies that matter” (Walsh 2009; Sedgwick 2003; Butler 1993).

### Digital Performance and Media

In the intervening decades since media became a serious topic of inquiry in anthropology, the world has shifted from capital-intensive terrestrial technologies – like broadcast television and radio – to being dominated by satellite, internet, and wireless technologies (Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod, and Larkin 2002). The internet, in particular, has opened up new kinds of spaces that have in turn enabled new global flows and exchanges that geopolitical and cultural boundaries might have otherwise precluded. These new technologies, sometimes referred to as “new media” have led to the increased privatization of media and the creation of media empires (Schiller 1991), on the one hand, and the exponential growth in the production of amateur and small media (Larkin 2000), on the other. Anthropological research on cassette tape sharing, video

culture, video and image sharing platforms, and social media and live streaming platforms all suggest that decentralized “small media” has ushered in a “new media era” that is fragmented and diverse, characterized by new forms of social organization, new relations of production, and new forms of economic organization resulting from the creation and expansion of informal media markets (Larkin 2000). Likewise, new media has created new markets for media consumption, new publics and audiences, and new social configurations.

More recent anthropological engagements with the internet and digital media have been concerned with online culture and community. Culture and community, of course, are notoriously unstable anthropological concepts, even more so when referring to online worlds and phenomena (Kozinets 2015). We can think about online communities as fundamentally “translocal sites of the social...not global or local but as contexts which are both transnational and local” (Rokka 2010, 382). This conceptualization helps us to consider digital culture and its specific practices as something adopted rather than ascribed, holistic, discrete, or ontologically secure. Rather, digital cultures “must be portrayed fluid processes, liquid Baumanite identities (Bauman 2003), Appadurian transnational flows of complex translocal scapes (Appadurai 1990). They are animated, born, maintained, mutated, dispersed, and transformed by individual consciousnesses. Although cultures and communities may be represented by members as homogenous, monolithic, and thus a priori, this is, as Benedict Anderson (1983) reminds us, only an imagining.” (Kozinets 2015, 10). If we take social media as an example, our personal webs of Facebook connections, for example, are constituted of both dispersed global relationships and conversations and intensely local experiences of sociality. In fact, contemporary livestreaming and social media platforms create feelings of shared spatiality and temporality across transnational flows; they create new modes of participation and real time engagement with

events happening within dispersed communities, a kind of engagement which Bonilla and Rosa call a “collective effervescence” (2015, 1).

In their book, *Digital Ethnography: Principles and Practice*, Pink et al. state that “a given social world may experience dramatic changes during ethnographic fieldwork...as a species spread throughout the planet, our social worlds have always been subject to sudden changes, including internal and external shocks...what distinguishes the current era is the added element of speed and reach of information enabled by our modern transport and telecommunications networks, and, more recently, by the proliferation of online and mobile digital media” (2016, 120). Traditionally, anthropological research on relationality, communication, and social organization have been focused on bounded communities who live or co-exist in close physical proximity to one another. That proximity has been theorized as creating what Goffman called “the full condition of copresence” (1963, 17), in which people must sense that they are close enough to one another to perceive and be perceived in order to be in community and communicate with one another. And yet, as Pink et al. (2016) note, even in small communities where communication takes place primarily in person, forms of mediation are always present. Migrant and diasporic communities have demonstrated that this need for proximity can be creatively circumvented through the use of communication technologies to stay connected (Milne 2010; Panagakos and Horst 2006). Digital media and communications technologies can therefore be creatively employed to create its own forms of copresence. Likewise, individuals and communities can use digital media and technologies to rework and reconfigure patterns of communication as well as our relationships to and with various forms of media (Pink et al. 2016).

Pink et al. (2016) note that there are two primary approaches to understanding the relationship between digital media technologies and human relationships: first, there is the focus on the management of communication through varying platforms; and second, the focus on the digital creation of co-presence. This research combines these approaches. With the former, one may examine how digital media has shaped, maintained, and/or created new forms and patterns of personal connection, looking specifically at how people use digital media to manage relationships through the combination of synchronous and asynchronous features (Baym 2010). The latter approach emphasizes the creation and significance of multiple forms of presence or co-presence through digital media. Gergen (2002), for example, explores how the mobile phone came to transform the relationships we hold with family, friends, and partners who are not physically co-located. They found that the maintenance of co-presence increasingly occurs across media platforms and that presence is both culturally constructed and always already mediated in some fashion (Gergen 2002). The ability of the people using those technologies to maintain distanced relationships to ignore that mediation is what enables – and is crucial to – the presence effect (Milne 2010). But so too does our ability to ignore the mediating effect of technology contribute to the blurring of boundaries between the spaces; as Gregg (2011) argued well before the pandemic, the presence of smartphones, laptops, and other digital media devices and technologies contributes to the conflation of the home and the workplace, what she terms a presence bleed. Interrogating mediated relationships as equally meaningful and worthy of scholarly inquiry requires challenging assumptions around the notion of presence, connection, and participation, as well as the role digital media plays in maintaining and transgressing boundaries between online and offline, absent and present, and virtual and actual.

The ways in which digital performance was technologically mediated in my fieldwork challenges traditional notions of what constitutes live performance. Auslander (1999) has argued that liveness as a concept is not an “ontologically defined condition”, but rather a “historically variable effect of mediatization” (2012, 3). Liveness is something that comes into being with the development of new technologies; Auslander (1999) locates this within the history of recording technologies, arguing that liveness emerges as an oppositional category only when technologies to record non-live media came into circulation. He argued that live performance could be understood as a kind of performance in which performers and audience were physically and temporally co-located or co-present. Over time, with the advent of broadcast television and live recordings, there was a cultural shift in how we understood liveness as both performers and audiences. This shift is further complicated by digital broadcasting and digital technologies. Auslander further posited that digital liveness, or our experiencing of digital technologies as live, was the product of that technologies’ ability to respond to us in real time (2012). In revising for the second edition of this book in the late 2000s, Auslander (2012) revisits this argument through the lens of phenomenology, noting that contemporary digital technologies have expanded the scope of liveness to the point that it can no longer be conceptually articulated in relation to emergent technologies.

Platforms like Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, and Twitch have fundamentally altered how the mediated, relational, and material elements of media are constituted, experienced, and shared; likewise, these platforms and their ilk have impacted how media, co-presence, relationality and are conceptualized and played out spatially and temporally. The proliferation of small media is central to this research. “Small media” refers to the spread of new forms of media whose patterns of production, control, content, dissemination, critique, and consumption differ radically from

that of mass media. Small media or new media is decentralized in that it can be produced by anybody who can afford a smartphone or camera and can be disseminated and circulated to vast and nebulous publics through those same digital technologies. Small or new media offer opportunities for consumer or audience input and interaction, and heighten the audience's control over how they consume it and their relationship to the media creator (Manuel 1993). Since the late 1990s, the emergence of cassette and CD burning culture and of video technology rapidly transformed the range of available media to those who could afford to consume them (Larkin 2000; Manuel 1993). The emergence of video culture, for example, rapidly altered the global media landscape as new communities of people began to use video and electronic technologies to produce and circulate their own media. The circulation of "small media" has been accompanied by the building of cultures, publics, fans, and critics (Larkin 2000). As Larkin (2000) noted in studying the rise of video culture in Nigeria in late 1990s, small media cultures have to be understood in a double context: at the macro level, they are bound up in global economic and social conditions that underlie technological advancements and aesthetic preferences, and at the micro level, media and their publics are mediated by the local social, cultural, and religious values. Media cultures, then, encompass transnational economic, social, and technological flows as well as the cultural forms generated within the localized social contexts.

The proliferation of small media has also triggered the emergence of new kinds of publics or audiences (Larkin 2000). The rise of video sharing culture on YouTube in the 2000s and 2010s, for example, configured new audiences for amateur media dispersed across the globe, while simultaneously creating new aesthetic standards and genres of videos as well as entirely new funding and dissemination models and metrics. New media has essentially served to privatize media production and consumption (Larkin 2000) – by that, I mean that anyone can produce,

market, and profit from their own media in the neoliberal entrepreneurial spirit. Likewise, the decentralization of media production from corporations to individuals has enabled marginalized communities to take up media production in ways that talk back to structures of power. Ginsburg (1993, 1997) termed this kind of work “cultural activism”, underscoring the potentialities of political agency and cultural intervention that people may bring into media creation. Along the same vein, Marcus (1996) coined the term “activist imaginary” to describe how marginalized groups take up film, video, and other media to pursue traditional activist goals of social change through a politics of identity and representation, but out of a desire for emancipatory projects. This research extends the concepts of cultural activism (Ginsburg 1993, 1997) and the activist imaginary (Marcus 1996) to theorize how marginalized communities use, repurpose, and build public and private digital performance spaces as inherently politicized – and sometimes political work – and as potentially emancipatory projects built upon platforms that were not built for their use.

As Hall (1980) notes, the production of media has historically been state controlled or concentrated in the hands of culture industry professionals, who Hall argues often share the dominant codes and/or normative narratives of the state. Because of this, censorship and self-censorship in production are the norm. As Abu-Lughod (2005) explains, mass media are powerful tools for social engineering, and that extends not only to the imagined audiences, but to the individuals you make that media, working within their own professional conventions and codes and with their own career interests at stake. That is not to say that those who work in the culture industry cannot ever be in opposition to dominant or normative codes, ideas, and narratives, but that significant tension exists for artists and producers who wish to position themselves as critical of normative codes. Moreover, as Abu-Lughod (2005) argues, the

messages of media are deflected by the way its viewers frame and interpret them, as well as by the ways in which a viewer's everyday life inflects those messages.

### Refusal and Trauma

The concepts recognition, refusal and trauma are central to how this dissertation grapples with queer performance. Beginning with recognition, I follow from Sara Ahmed's (2013) assertion that the recognition (or misrecognition) of others as different or apart from ourselves brings our own subjectivities into being through what Althusser calls interpellation (2014). Within this framework, the Other comes into being as abject, apart, and often as always already injured or in need of intervention and regulation. Simpson (2011) has argued that refusal is an alternative to this Hegelian framework of recognition and misrecognition. Simpson (2011) conceptualizes refusal as a political and ethical stance in direct contrast to the desire to be recognized within a framework that always already misrecognizes and dehumanizes marginalized communities as Other. Rather than fighting for recognition as subjects within that framework, Simpson argues that one can refuse these logics altogether, effectively refusing the legitimacy of "those who are usually in the position of recognizing" (2011, 11) to confer alterity at all.

As Hartman (1997) demonstrates, this framework of recognition centers the pain and/or damage of alterity. Anthropology, too, has historically focused on collecting our interlocutors' stories of pain and humiliation, often for commodification and our gain. Engaging with refusal requires us to ask difficult questions, which Tuck and Yang so adeptly summarize:

"How do we learn from and respect the wisdom and desires in the stories that we (over) hear, while refusing to portray/betray them to the spectacle of the settler colonial gaze? How do we develop an ethics for research that differentiates between power—which deserves a denuding, indeed petrifying scrutiny—and people? At the same time, as

fraught as research is in its complicity with power, it is one of the last places for legitimated inquiry. It is at least still a space that proclaims to care about curiosity.” (2014, 223).

Building on the work of Sedgwick (1990) in their exploration of refusal, Tuck and Yang (2014) make three key observations about the state of academic knowledge production: first, the subaltern can speak but only from the confines of damage-centered narratives; two, there are some forms of knowledge that the academy should not have and does not deserve access to; and third, that research is not always an appropriate intervention. Tuck and Yang (2014) understand the academy as an inherently colonial formation; under coloniality, they argue, the production of knowledge becomes centered around the researcher’s sense of self and the self/Other knowledge paradigm. Descartes’s classic formulation, “I think, therefore I am” becomes transformed into “I conquer, therefore I am”; Maldonado-Torres (2009) argues that coloniality shifts this dynamic even further, producing the conqueror’s subjectivity in relation to their knowledge of the Other, now “I know them, therefore I am me”. In this right, the pursuit of knowledge of the Other became a justification for the colonial acquisition of bodies, artefacts, and territories; the right to conquer becomes inextricable from the right to know (Maldonado-Torres 2009; Tuck and Yang 2014). Knowledge production under coloniality is premised on an entitlement to the Other; refusal is, then, an attempt to limit the conquest and colonization of knowledge “by marking what is off limits, what is not up for grabs or discussion, what is sacred, and what can’t be known” (Tuck and Yang 2014; 225).

Returning to the documenting of damage, Tuck (2009; 2010) has argued that this damage-centered paradigm produces researchers who operate within a theory of change in which harm must be documented in order to convince colonial institutions that it has occurred at all and that redress is warranted. This formation requires marginalized communities to expound upon

their harm and to position themselves as always already injured and powerless in order to make the case for recognition (Tuck 2010). Ultimately, the extraction of trauma from marginalized communities rarely results in any substantive change but inevitably leaves those communities with the narrative that they are broken. This appropriating and repackaging of trauma or damage-centered narratives into academic prose and theory has been theorized by hooks (1990) as a form of symbolic violence. Tuck and Yang, likewise, understand the collecting of trauma narratives as a double erasure in which pain is documented “in order to be erased, often by eradicating the communities that are supposedly injured and supplanting them with hopeful stories of progress into a better, Whiter, world” (2014, 231).

Three concurrent dimensions of refusal manifest in Simpson’s (2011) ethnography of Kahnawa:ke. First, there is a refusal of her research participants to share and disclose certain information. Second, there is Simpson’s refusal as the ethnographer to write about the personal pain and internal politics of Mohawk citizenship. And third, there is a general refusal to engage with the logics of settler colonialism at all, a more general refusal of coloniality and its politics of recognition. In *Mohawk Interruptus* (2011), Simpson’s interlocutors perform refusal by speaking in deliberate phrases like “no one seems to know” to indicate both the existence of some shared common knowledge and the unwillingness to disclose it, effectively demarcating the limits of what knowledge is public and what ought to remain private (Tuck and Yang 2014). Both Simpson and her interlocutors essentially refuse to fulfill the “ethnographic want for a speaking subaltern” (Tuck and Yang 2014, 239).

Refusal is generative, not subtractive. It encompasses more than the presence of a “no”, it is also a fundamental redirection towards the otherwise unacknowledged or unquestioned (Simpson 2007). An example of this is Gonzales-Day’s (2006) *Erased Lynching* series. This

series of images are the product of Gonzales-Day's (2006) research on lynching in the American Southwest, which found that lynchings were public spectacles attended by large crowds of festive onlookers and documented by professional photographers. Photographers sold their images of lynched racialized bodies as postcards, which served to affectively immortalize the murders of racialized peoples, and proliferate and reinforce white settler colonial ideologies of the inherent violability of the non-white body. The centrality of the image of the injured or murdered racialized body – the imagery of pain narratives – to white entertainment is indicative of this modality of recognizing personhood in relation to pain, violation, and the stochastic terror of supremacy (Tuck and Yang 2014). Gonzales-Day (2006) exhibited a series of these lynching images with a key intervention – he removed the ropes, nooses, and victims from the images, leaving behind the trees and the crowds of white onlookers gathered to witness racial violence. This is a kind of refusal to produce images of violation and injury:

“Refusal prompts analysis of the festive spectators regularly backgrounded in favor of wounded bodies, strange fruit, interesting scars. Refusal shifts the gaze from the violated body to the violating instruments—in this case, the lynch mob, which does not disappear when the lynching is over, but continues to live, accumulating land and wealth through the extermination and subordination of the Other. Thus, refusal helps move us from thinking of violence as an event and toward an analysis of it as a structure” (Tuck and Yang 2014, 241).

In his intervention, Gonzales-Day limited what the viewer can access and in refusing those images, redirects the viewer's gaze to the crowd of white onlookers. He effectively introduces a new representational territory to familiar images, one that refuses to engage or reproduce the settler colonial gaze and which refuses to deliver or satisfy the demand for the Other's pain. In that sense, refusal is prohibitive per se, but generative of new lines of inquiry. Here, the refusal of colonial regimes of representation turns the viewer's gaze back onto colonial power and colonial modalities of recognizing persons. Moreover, it generates new representations that

colonial knowledge production would otherwise limit. This point can also clearly be seen in Simpson's (2011) complicated portrayal of Kahnawa:ke which deliberately refuses to reproduce anthropological ideas and histories of the Iroquois. For Simpson (2007; 2011), refusal is a kind of anti-colonial calculus around what knowledge needs to be shared in an ethnography and what does not. For Gonzales-Day (2006), refusal is a mode representation.

The refusal of pain and trauma narratives does not negate the fact that pain and trauma are very much real and, in the case of queer life, often loom ever present. Rather, what is inherent to these theorizations of theoretical, methodological, and ethnographic refusal is the refusal to (re)produce or compound trauma. Traditionally, the term trauma invokes a wound or a medically identifiable injury. Within trauma theory, trauma is understood more broadly as psychological, as something that has happened to breach one's sense of safety, sometimes to the point of fearing for one's life. In that sense, trauma can also encompass a set of responses a person has to an adverse event or series of events and conditions (Forster 2011, 2014). Trauma theory has its roots in psychoanalysis, post-World War II history and particularly the study of the Holocaust, and clinical practice. As a body of critical theory, it addresses trauma not as an individual phenomenon but as a cultural phenomenon, interrogating how cultural responses to trauma have shaped and informed how we understand what trauma is and can be (Forster 2014; Cvetkovich 2003; Mandel 2006). The trauma theory literature delineates between Trauma and trauma, with the former referring to a specific event that is identifiable with a specific space and time and the latter referring to smaller events that have a cumulative effect over time (Forster 2011). The latter, trauma, can encompass the effects of long-term structural and stochastic violence on marginalized communities. By structural violence, I am referring to violence that is exerted indirectly through social structures and institutions (Farmer 2004), whereas stochastic violence

refers to the theory from terrorism studies that the public demonization of marginalized communities within popular media can result in the incitement of political and physical violence against those communities (Amman and Meloy 2021).

Trauma is relational, it is something that “sheers us off from our expected connections with others, from our perceived social supports, from our basic sense of safety, however locally construed” (Lester 2013, 754). Because it is relational, our understandings of trauma are always already intertwined in our social, cultural, and personal conceptualizations of what is necessary to live a “good life”. Trauma narratives, then, are narratives which focus on that wound or disconnection. This dissertation is particularly concerned by the demand for queer trauma narratives, or dominant narratives of queerness which hold queerness to be inherently wounding. The idea that trauma is inherent to queer life is a dominant and normative narrative in cis/heteronormative society in which queerness is a source of conflict or suffering, and it is through this logic that queer characters and/or artists become legible as subjects in that imaginary. The demand for stories by and/or about queer people which center our trauma is a demand to relegate queer people to the “suffering slot” (Robbins 2013) and to center the agency of cis/heteronormative audiences to intervene upon us. It is a demand to show the audience what has been done to you and to then render that legible through very specific tropes that will not threaten the audience or make them uncomfortable.

The idea that queerness necessitates victimhood, rejection, abjection, violence, and impending tragedy has been among the dominant narratives of queerness in the Western cultural imaginary for some time. As Caprioglio (2021) explains in her research on queer narratives and representation in television

“Experiences and articulations of queerness and of trauma appear linked ... this linkage is potentially formative of deeper patterns. If television provides role models and representations that may affect or attempt to reflect the identification and social expectation of its viewers (Gomillion & Giuliano, 2011), the implication here for queer viewers may be that queer identity itself is predicated on experiencing trauma – that if one identifies as queer and has not already been traumatized, expect to survive trauma in the future. These narratives do not only affect those seeking queer role models, either; TV’s status as a mass medium means that this message speaks to viewers generally, especially in its consistent repetition (Gerbner, 1998). Moreover, the implication of childhood/adolescent trauma as linked to queer identity may have impacts for the continued naturalization of institutional, systemic, and interpersonal, especially familial, queerphobic violence. The demand that queer individuals confess their trauma within these narrative arcs also places the onus on queer individuals themselves to call out queerphobic violence and institutional modes of queer traumatization. They cannot, apparently, expect the systems that have traumatized them to provide a route to change” (462).

Likewise, the abject and/or monstrous queer figure has occupied a central place in that imaginary. Even within queer theory, the “queer death drive” has been a dominant analytical lens for framing queer life (Edelman 2004). These particular imaginings of queerness as inherently tragic and/or traumatic are so familiar, so deeply engrained in the cultural imaginary, that they come to shape how heteronormative society frames and interacts with queer communities in such a way that ultimately serves to (re)produce these narratives as natural and innate.

### Visibility and Absence

Anthropologists have long been concerned by the circulation of images of traumatized or suffering subjects. On the one hand, scholars have argued that visual images of suffering may foster a shared sense of humanity between the viewer and the subject. Sliwinski (2011), for example, traces how the circulation of images of natural disasters, slavery, colonial violence, and atrocities like the Holocaust played an integral part in the emergence of the idea of universal human rights. Tracing this pictorial trail, she argues that images of suffering, trauma, and violence can be used to create “interior feelings” that inform and (re)produce moral arguments. Put simply, “feelings inspired by images as a central aspect of cultural life changed the way

ordinary people understood their shared humanity and created what we might call, after Sara Ahmed, an affective visual economy” (MacDonald 2019, 270). On the other hand, images of suffering subjects are prone to decontextualization, dehistoricization, and Othering. In order to construct a subject as a suffering subject, we have to render their suffering universally recognizable. To do so, the suffering body comes to exist outside of time and place, history and politics, relations and context (Ticktin 2011). To construct imagery of suffering subjects that is ripe for consumption, we remove the context of how that subject came to suffer so as not to invoke our own complicity in the systems and structures that dispossessed or wounded them to begin with.

Moreover, as has been alluded to above, images of violence can be used to further violence. The imagery of traumatized or suffering subjects has been central to white entertainment for centuries across modalities and is indicative of the larger recognition of personhood or subjecthood in relation to pain, violation, and the white saviour complex (Tuck and Yang 2014; Hartman 1997). While these images may inflict violence in the form of corporeal incoherence, they may also serve to reinforce violent structures or, in some cases, to contribute to stochastic violence. I am borrowing the term stochastic violence from the study of stochastic terrorism, or the idea that the public demonization of marginalized communities within popular media can result in the incitement of political and physical violence against those communities (Amman and Meloy 2021). For example, the idea that queer and trans\* bodies are inherently sexual is one narrative that emerges from these media and image-worlds. This idea has been taken and recirculated as fact by homophobic and transphobic agitators, evolving into accusations by politicians, media personalities and celebrities, and ordinary people online that queer people are sexual predators or “groomers”. In turn, these accusations have motivated

individuals to carry out acts of physical violence and politicians to carry out acts of structural and symbolic violence against queer people, particularly trans\* women.

What is the dominant visual message in an image-world made up of misrepresentations of queer life, on the one hand, and a constructed absence of inconvenient representations of queer people living a good life, on the other hand? I would argue that the message is that queerness is inherently tragic, that queer bodies are abject, dangerous, suffering subjects to be acted upon – whether that action be to save them from violence, save them from themselves, or to legislatively or violently remove them from existence. This message is predicated not only on the circulation of particular imagery and discourses, but on the absence of images which contradict this narrative. That is, this dominant message is predicated on upholding discursive silences and constructing the absences of images of queer and trans\* people living joyful and fulfilled lives in their own bodies, or even just existing in completely ordinary, unremarkable, undramatic and non-tragic circumstances.

The queer body has traditionally been staged as an object of scrutiny (Dickinson et al. 2018; Cregan 2009). Like other marginalized bodies – particularly racialized and disabled bodies – queer bodies have historically been (mis)recognized and understood in opposition to cis/heteronormative white able bodies. Just as racialized bodies are recognized and constructed in the white liberal imaginary as in opposition to and contingent on compulsory whiteness, and disabled bodies to compulsory able-bodiedness, the queer body is always already constructed in relation to compulsory heterosexuality. The systems which produce these axes of marginality are interconnected and interdependent (McRuer 2006). White supremacy, compulsory able-bodiedness, and compulsory heterosexuality all shape what bodies are able and culturally permitted to do; over time, those bodies take on the shape of those repeated norms. In repeating

some gestures and not others, bodies change; they take on forms that enable some actions and restrict others (Ahmed 2006). The cultural institutions that compose and (re)produce straightness, whiteness, and abled-bodiedness also produce discourses that normalize and render the that process of production unthinkable (McRuer 2006). To normalize and routinize something like compulsory heterosexuality is an inherently performative process of myth-making, one which appropriates cultural and historical objects and signs, attaching new meaning and moral value to them, whilst simultaneously rendering those values seemingly self-evident and the process of their production invisible (Barthes 1957; McRuer 2006). As an object of scrutiny, queer bodies are often staged – even by some queer artists – within these limitations, bound to reproduce very specific and permissible iterations of queerness that have been culturally naturalized as acceptable.

The staging of queer bodies has further been traditionally preoccupied with abjection, spectrality, and death. By abjection, I mean the “vague sense of horror that permeates the boundary between the self and the other” (Phillips 2014, 19). Abjection, as theorized by Kristeva (1982), is a process that serves to maintain and reinforce the boundaries of identificatory regimes by rejecting that which “does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (Kristeva 1982, 4). Kristeva’s (1982) theory of abjection is concerned primarily with the constitution of acceptable and unacceptable forms of subjectivity and the sociality of the self; those who render problematic the fixity of categories – like male and female, for example – fall into this category of the abject, that which is cast off and separate, an object of ambiguity, disruption, and horror. In her critical feminist film analysis, *The Monstrous Feminine*, Creed (1993) argues that where gender is concerned, villainous or “horrific” figures in horror movies emerge from a space of ambiguity and bring with them the destructive power of

trampling boundaries between masculine and feminine. This tension around controlling and maintaining boundaries is central, Creed (1993) argues, to patriarchal discourses of masculinity and the threat of categorical ambiguity in a manifestation of masculine anxiety. The monstrous-feminine in the horror genre – or those characters which subvert patriarchally acceptable constructions of submissive femininity or which are improperly or effeminately male – is constructed as a figure of abjection because it threatens the stability of binary gender categories. Ultimately, abject or monstrous figures are punished physically, psychologically, and symbolically to restore “the power of patriarchy within conventional signifying practices” (Gutierrez-Albilla 2008, 68). Returning to representations and stagings of queer bodies, the abject – or those bodies which threaten dominant, normative, or even hegemonic ideals and social power formations – are excluded and repressed in order to maintain and secure social order. An unease with trans\*, non-binary, genderfluid, and genderqueer subjectivities, for example, can be traced back to this fear and threat of the categorically ambiguous.

Queer abjection often takes physical form in the monstrous queer figure. The monstrous queer is an exceedingly common trope in popular media which depicts queer characters as one dimensional, based in stereotypes, with clear referents to popular understandings of queerness (which some have termed queer-coding), while also constructed as figuratively or literally monstrous. Queer monsters – whether human or not – are always already dehumanized and vilified. They are figures who threaten or disrupt heteronormativity, gendered norms or practices of traditional femininity and masculinity, and patriarchal social norms. The monstrous queer – that abject threatening body – is both constructed by cis/heteronormative society in relation to heteronormative boundaries and by homonormative constituencies in relation to boundaries of

tolerance and propriety. Stryker summarizes this most adeptly in her classic essay, “My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage”:

“The attribution of monstrosity remains a palpable characteristic of most lesbian and gay representations of transsexuality, displaying in unnerving detail the anxious, fearful underside of the current cultural fascination with transgenderism. Because transsexuality more than any other transgender practice or identity represents the prospect of destabilizing the foundational presupposition of fixed genders upon which a politics of personal identity depends, people who have invested their aspirations for social justice in identitarian movements say things about us out of sheer panic that, if said of other minorities, would see print only in the most hate-riddled, white supremacist, Christian fascist rags.” (2006, 245)

and,

“I will say this as bluntly as I know how: I am transsexual, and therefore I am a monster...the affront your humans take at being called a ‘creature’ results from the threat the term poses to your status as ‘lords of creation’, beings elevated above mere material existence. As in the case of being called ‘it’, being called a ‘creature’ suggests that lack of loss of a superior personhood. I find no shame, however, in acknowledging my egalitarian relationship with non-human material Being; everything emerges from the same matrix of possibilities. ‘Monster’ is derived from the Latin noun *monstrum*, ‘divine portent,’ itself formed on the root of the verb *monere*, ‘to warn.’ It came to refer to living things of anomalous shape or structure, or to fabulous creatures like the sphinx who were composed of strikingly incongruous parts, because the ancients considered the appearance of such beings to be a sign of some impending supernatural event. Monsters, like angels, functioned as messengers and heralds of the extraordinary. They served to announce impending revelation, saying, in effect, ‘Pay attention; something of profound importance is happening.’” (2006, 246-247)

To summarize, the mere idea of a monster – a being constructed and (re)made against naturalized categories – with life, with joy, with love, with agency, is a principal source of horror that has long permeated the Western cultural imaginary.

Theatrical performances, in particular, have historically emphasized the ghostly or haunted nature of queer characters and performers. The presence of haunting is not necessarily coterminous with abjection or the monstrous queer figure; ghostly presences and the haunting of that which we can see is not there are a particular queer way of recounting histories, storytelling, and producing knowledge about life at the margins. One way that abject presences manifests is through absence, which is particularly relevant to my interlocutors’ experiences of visibility and

permissibility. One way to think about absence – and specifically the constructed absence of politically undesirable peoples – is through Avery Gordon’s (2008) theorization of haunting. Gordon considers the absence of those who have been disappeared, constructing the absence or lack of something or someone as an agential presence which haunts those who remain. Haunting, Gordon argues, is a “constituent element of modern social life” (2008, 7); the absent presence (Derrida 1976) of those who are lost or hidden has a profound effect on those left in its wake. That we feel haunted by an absence – by the spectre of the missing – is a social phenomenon. Gordon (2008) notes these unnatural absences are felt, they are unsettling and filled with a “charged strangeness” through which we can tell that something is missing. Sometimes that thing which haunts us takes a form, a metaphorical (or perhaps real) ghost around which we build mythologies and worldviews. Gordon argues that the ghost is a symptom of what is missing. The ghost “gives notice not only to itself but also to what it represents. What it represents is usually a loss, sometimes of life, sometimes of a path not taken. From a certain vantage point, the ghost also simultaneously represents a future possibility, a hope” (2008, 63-64). Finally, Gordon (2008) argues that the ghost is alive or agential; we are in relation to the absent presences which haunt us and, often, we must reckon with them. The reason we bother to engage or reckon with that which is absent is rooted in what Gordon calls a “concern for justice”. That resonates here – the reason my interlocutors are so concerned with presence, absence, and absent presences is deeply rooted in a concern for justice, for their own inclusion in and equity in virtual and physical realms.

While I am partial to the framework of hauntology, Sofer (2013) offers a different perspective on elements of a performance that we cannot see, which he terms dark matter. Borrowing from physics, dark matter refers to those invisible elements of a performance that

escape our visual field but whose incorporeal effects deeply shape our experience of a performance. While Sofer (2013) is focused more on intentional absences – that is, fictive spaces and indexical signs that are intentionally used or not used in a performance – his understanding of how absence shapes theatre is crucially relevant. He argues that the invisible continually structures and focuses our experience and perception of theatre and that that which is materially unrepresented onstage is therefore unignorable. Sofer’s understanding of absence runs parallel to, but does not quite intersect with, the forced absences my interlocutors endured when their performances were removed. It does, however, speak to the intentional choice to self-censor that some of my interlocutors made in response to these removals; when my interlocutors intentionally removed “objectionable” materials from their performances, they served as a kind of dark matter, materially unrepresented but unignorable.

Inherent in these discussions of absence or haunting are notions of what it means to be present, to be visible. Like Gordon, I understand visibility as a “complex system of permission and prohibition, of presence and absence, punctuated alternately by apparitions and hysterical blindness” (2008, 17). The kind of queer visibility that I have observed in the field and described in this dissertation is akin to what Gordon (2008) calls “visible invisibility”. In talking about disappearances, Gordon (2008) argues that absence is not inherently invisible; those who know where to look or for what or whom to look can see that something is missing. Or, as Gordon puts it, “I see you are not there” (2008, 16). On the one hand, images of queer joy have been made largely invisible. On the other, stereotypes and strawmen arguments of and about queer and trans\* communities are hypervisible online and in the cultural and political imaginaries. Gordon’s understanding of hypervisibility is a useful framework for thinking through the complexity of queer and trans\* visibility, and the ways in which they have been visible and/or

not visible, in recent years. Gordon's definition of hypervisibility is an extension of the writer Ralph Ellison's:

“In a 1981 introduction to *Invisible Man*, Ralph Ellison wrote: “despite the bland assertions of sociologists, [the] ‘high visibility’ [of the African-American man] actually rendered one un-visible” (xii). Hypervisibility is a persistent alibi for the mechanisms that render one invisible: “His darkness ... glow[ing]... within the American conscience with such intensity that most whites feigned moral blindness toward his predicament.” The difficulty for us now, as it was for Ellison when he published *Invisible Man* in 1952, is the extent to which the mediums of public image making and visibility are inext”icably wedded to the cojoined mechanisms that systematically render certain groups of people apparently privately poor, uneducated, ill, and disenfranchised. Ellison's *Invisible Man* gives double reference both to the invisibility of the hypervisible African-American man and to the invisibility of “the Man” who persistently needs an alibi for the blindness of his vision.” (Gordon 2008, 17; Ellison 1981, xii in Gordon 2008)

Hypervisibility is, essentially, a double-edged sword in which a marginalized group is overrepresented in public and political debate while simultaneously being (mis)represented and flattened into monolithic stereotypes and talking points. In being both highly visible as an image, stereotype, or token, hypervisible constituencies are simultaneously dehumanized, rendered a technical problem to be solved and legislated rather than a group of diverse and complex human beings that may not necessarily even be in community with one another, but who constitute a shared identity category. The hypervisibility of trans\* children, for example, flattens them into a monolithic stereotypical (mis)representation of abject misery, poor mental health, and abuse; policymakers then effectively criminalize the existence of trans\* minors, effectively compounding, and in some cases actively creating, those problems. Because being highly visible can be so flattening, it may actually function as a type of invisibility.

Returning to questions of absence, Toni Morrison has argued that “invisible things are not necessarily not-there” and that absence holds a strong presence (Morrison 1989, cited in Gordon 2008). As Gordon notes, to write about exclusion and invisibilities involves a “constant negotiation between what can be seen and what is in the shadows” (2008, 17); it involves

attention to those shadows and echoes of what cannot be seen as much as what is visible, attention to the complex relations of permissions and prohibitions. Attention to absent presence, to the spectre of the missing, is a queer way of knowing. It is my contention in this dissertation that in rendering absence visible, in paying attention to the absent presences my interlocutors feel so intensely, I am recording an alternate history of this time in digital space. Just as recording complaints is a feminist method of recording the histories of institutions (Ahmed 2021), recording exclusion and absence is a way of knowing:

“You cannot encounter this kind of disappearance as a grand historical fact, as a mass of data adding up to an event, marking itself in straight empty time, settling the ground for a future cleansed of its spirit...haunting is a special way of knowing what has happened or is happening”. (Gordon 2008, 63)

When we take up the issue of absence/presence in the production and consumption of digital media, we are, in effect, talking about representation(s). Hall (1989) has argued that media is not a mirror that reflects what already exists, but rather functions as “a form of representation which is able to constitute us as new kinds of subjects, and thereby enable us to discover who we are” (80). Hall is writing about cinematic representations of the Caribbean which similarly hold a marginalized population within this dominant, dispossessing white gaze, slotting the Caribbean into the role of victimhood, trauma, and injury. Quoting Fanon, he argues that “colonisation is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its group and emptying the native’s brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures, and destroys it” (Fanon 1963, 170). As a broader statement about power, Fanon and Hall alike argue that the always already empowered seek not only to disconnect and dispossess marginalized communities of their own cultural power, but to further take up and manipulate their pasts into dominant narratives which disfigure cultural

identities and normalize social stratification. Images, media, and dominant narratives – particularly those constructed *about* marginalized communities rather than by and/or for them – position and subject those communities within dominant regimes of representation in such a way that seeks to normalize the cultural power of the dominant group. As Hall explains,

“They had the power to make us see and experience ourselves as “Other”. Every regime of representation is a regime of power formed, as Foucault reminds us, by the fatal couplet “power/knowledge”. And this kind of knowledge is internal, not external. It is one thing to place some person or set of peoples as the Other of a dominant discourse. It is quite another thing to subject them to that “knowledge”, not only as a matter of imposed will and domination, by the power of inner compulsion and subjective conformation to the norm.” (1989, 71)

To talk about representations of marginalized communities, then, we must interrogate the “style in which they are imagined” (Hall 1989, 80).

That is not to say that all representations made by and for marginalized communities always position those communities outside of dominant modes of representation. Artists and marginalized communities have agency in how they wish to represent themselves and they may well choose to do so within dominant logics. My interlocutors would see representations of “authentic” queerness as inherently outside of dominant modes of representation, but this raises potentially problematic, exclusionary, and gatekeeping assumptions around what constitutes authentic queerness, presuming that it is always already a radical identity performed in radical ways. It also presupposes how viewers will interpret representations of queerness, assuming that they view and understand these representations outside of dominant modes of representation rather than within them. Dominant narratives, though, are structuring in that they help us to quickly make sense of complex information about other people through easily digestible frameworks. The simple but complicating fact is that just because an artist creates a performance piece that they see as fundamentally rejecting tragedy and trauma for an audience of queer

people who already understand it as such does not mean that other audiences will not still perceive and make sense of it through dominant frameworks that render it still inherently tragic.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have outlined the theoretical frameworks that shape this dissertation. Beginning with queer performance, I have outlined the two analytical frameworks that inform my conceptualization of gender and sexuality: embodiment and queer phenomenology. Building on Ahmed's (2006) argument that sexuality is an orientation in the spatial sense, queerness is about how one negotiates and performs the flows and directions of desire between bodies, objects and places (Dickinson et al. 2018; Campbell and Farrier 2016). I further outline here how the construction of "good" and "bad" queer subjects in relation to those performances of orientation become the lens through which the participation of queer and trans people in public life is policed. Building on this, my conceptualization of queer performance builds on Leslie Hill's (2000) theorization of performance art as an art form that emerged from a community that was largely accustomed to being excluded from institutional spaces and had a predisposition for carving out their own space.

With respect to digital performance and media, I have provided an overview of the multidisciplinary literature concerning digital media and online platforms, emphasizing the ways in which contemporary platforms create feelings of shared spatiality and temporality across dispersed communities. I then explored how this research engages with the relationship between digital media and human relationships; building on Pink et al. (2016), I outline how my approach emphasizes both the role digital media plays in shaping, maintaining and creating personal connections, and the creation and significance of multiple forms of co-presence in digital media. Finally, this section provided an overview of how the decentralized production of new digital

media enabled marginalized communities to take up media production in ways that talk back to structures of power. Building on Ginsburg (1993, 1997) and Marcus (1996), I theorize how marginalized communities use, repurpose, and build public and private digital performance spaces as inherently politicized – and sometimes political work – and as potentially emancipatory projects built upon platforms that were not built for their use.

In the section on the refusal, I provided an overview of Simpson’s (2014) theorization of generative refusal and its relationship to recognition. From there, I outline how the documenting of trauma functions within this understanding of recognition. At the core of this section is an engagement with how literature on trauma and how the extraction of trauma from marginalized communities comes to create damage-centered narratives about these communities. I further outlined my conceptualization of trauma as relational and always already intertwined in our social, cultural, and personal conceptualizations of what is necessary to live a “good life”.

Finally, in the section on visibility and absence, I engage with the staging of the queer body as an object of scrutiny and abjection which reproduce specific and permissible iterations of queerness that have been culturally naturalized as acceptable. I then engaged with Gordon (2008) and Sofer’s (2013) understandings of absence to begin to conceptualize how the invisibility or absence of non-normative queer content online reverberates. Sofer’s argument that the invisible structures our perceptions of what is materially represented and Gordon’s understanding of visibility as a system of permission and prohibition inform my own theorization of absence in this dissertation.

## Chapter 3: Digital Spacemaking and Communities of Care

### Introduction

This chapter explores how my interlocutors made sense of and conceptualized the spaces they occupied online and the ways in which they understood their roles and communal responsibilities in safeguarding those spaces. This chapter opens by situating this discussion in my interlocutors' discussions of space and care. I then provide a brief overview of key theories of care in the anthropological literature in order to situate my own understanding of care. In what follows, I engage in more depth with the anthropological literature on space and place and begin to explore how my interlocutors thought about their construction of digital queer locales as "spacemaking". In exploring my interlocutors' experiments with community-building and spacemaking online, I argue that my interlocutors' creative processes can be understood as forms of care practices specific to the time, space, and technology of online life during the pandemic. Spacemaking, as my interlocutors articulated it, was intertwined with what they understood to be transgressive and/or political acts embedded in their artistic practices. This is not to say that all performance practices are inherently transgressive – nor that all artists understood their work to be inherently political – but that my interlocutors were largely in consensus about this view.<sup>5</sup> I take up the Monarchs and particularly Noah's intentional acts to create safe spaces as an illustrating example of this idea. Finally, in theorizing care as a process which connects those who provide care and those who need care in order to meet one another's needs and sustain the life of the community, I conceptualize my interlocutors' varied care practices and acts of transgression and refusal in digital performance spaces as care tactics.

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<sup>5</sup> My interlocutors had been engaging with these ideas before the pandemic, and before I began my fieldwork. In a sense, one could argue that they had self-selected a network of performers who felt the same way. They would certainly argue that they had made principled decisions about who to work with and who to platform that were based in a shared values system regarding the politics of queer life and queer performance.

In conceptualizing care as sustaining social existence and constituting a range of social, semiotic, and performative practices, I hold that political acts of resistance to violent structures *are* intentional acts to sustain the community's life. These actions are understood by my interlocutors as inseparable from care; they are, therefore, care practices and care tactics. Does this mean that all marginalized communities would agree that acts of resistance taken to sustain life are inherently care tactics? Perhaps not. My interlocutors were explicitly thinking about their actions this way, but they had been having conversations about care, survival, and the politics of their work long before I came into these spaces. These were people who had been intensely networked before the pandemic and who were intentionally building in-person care networks pre-2020, within a community that is admittedly cliquey and self-selecting.

My introduction to this way of thinking about care came out of conversations about taking up space. In early 2021, I attended a Zoom panel about gender and burlesque in which participants discussed how the pandemic made it harder to gather and perform online. The panel was made up of a variety of performing artists, most of whom performed in some variation of drag (though they did not all identify as drag or gender performers) and all of whom engaged in some form of burlesque and/or cabaret. Burlesque and cabaret spaces have long had deep relationships to drag, ballroom, and queer performance, existing themselves as traditionally marginalized and excluded art forms that make space for non-normative and/or exaggerated bodies and performances of gender identity, sexual identity, and sexuality. In Toronto – and other parts of Canada – burlesque venues and houses have been well-established spaces in which drag kings, gender performers, and other queer artists have been welcome to perform non-normative and/or experimental work that otherwise would not be bookable or commercially viable in the traditional drag venues of the Village. One draglesque described this relationship thusly: “I think drag and cabaret allow

space where I have authority over my body as a trans person, which I don't always find in theatre. And that's huge when trans folks don't even have authority over our bodies in day-to-day life.”

One burlesque performer described how she had witnessed marginalized communities being increasingly pushed off the digital platforms they had occupied during the pandemic as more people moved online. A familiar narrative began to emerge as they asked one another how they were navigating what they termed a “hijacking” of their industry. Over the course of 2020, the cabaret and burlesque communities had experienced what they understood to be a “sexual content” ban on various social media and livestreaming platforms (see chapter five for further discussion). In response to this, these artists had moved from Instagram and other social media platforms to Twitch.tv, but then experienced a similar banning of their livestreamed performances and their channels. This in turn forced them onto less stable platforms, which were also not guaranteed to not enact the same content bans. One burlesque performer noted: “it becomes this huge task just to find a virtual space to do the work that you've been doing for *years* in various different spaces”. They understood this to be an effect of FOSTA-SESTA which has now been amplified by the shift to remote life during the pandemic. One of my interlocutors, Bini, lamented on this panel that this policing of digital space left them devoid of any hope for change. They began:

“I am infuriated that the avenues that we are given are always already corporatized and about monetizing and already set up with algorithms that have migrated over from other platforms...seeing the spaces that we have historically been able to at least moderately express ourselves in or at least advertise that we will be expressing ourselves in, be tightened with more draconian and hilarious regulations like banning emojis. Emojis!”  
But then, in true Bini fashion, their expression shifted from annoyance to one of deep thought that I recognized from our conversations. They continued, slowly at first, “I guess this does

remind me of one hopeful thing”, before launching into an impassioned description of how their friends in Amsterdam were working with community groups to build their own servers to fight against the selective censorship of queer bodies. “We need to literally take this into our own hands” they exclaimed to the Zoom audience.

A recurring theme among these communities was that taking up space was a radical act of care and community-building. “There’s no better place than the stage,” said one burlesque performer, “I want to be seen and heard. And I’ve fought back against people who said I shouldn’t be there by taking up even more space”. Time and time again, these artists described the act of putting transgressive bodies on stage – both in-person and virtually – as revolutionary transgressive acts. Moreover, they described not only taking up space for themselves, but then leveraging that space to carve out and build new spaces for their community. The very act of staging racialized, queer, trans\*, transgressive bodies within a space that is designed to suppress and erase those representations is both an intentional political act and an act of spacemaking, community-building, and care. It is a literal embodiment of speaking truth to power, especially under the circumstances of increased precarity that the pandemic wrought.

### The Anthropology of Care

In the anthropological literature, care is an everchanging and unstable concept that may describe a range of medical and health practices, familial caregiving and kin relations, biopolitics, discursive formations, and affective states (Buch 2015). The various ways in which anthropologists understand care all emphasize relationality; that is, they emphasize the social activities of care and the relations that constitute them. Care manifests in interpersonal relationships semiotically, through linguistic practices and communication, as well as through material artefacts and environments; to care and to receive care is simultaneously an embodied

experience and a social action (Arnold 2021; Black 2018; Goodwin 2015; Ochs 2012). Care is often conceptualized in relation to the sustaining of physical life, but it also serves to sustain social life (Buch 2015). Care encompasses a wide range of physical, social, affective, semiotic, and performative actions that serve to sustain existence, particularly when communities find themselves at a distance. I understand care as an open-ended process which connects the caring and the cared-for in order to meet socially recognized needs, a framing which comes from Thelen's (2015) work on care and which builds upon Tronto (1993)'s analysis of care as a process and Mol's (2008) emphasis on the interactional and connected nature of care work. Thelen (2015) argues that care practices – which encompass the affective, material, and relational qualities of what is done in care (Mol et al. 2010) – are a central element of social organization. Thelen (2015) understands care practices as constituting and undoing significant relations of social structure; that is to say, care practices can serve to (re)make relationship and (re)form social organization, particularly at times of crisis.

I do not explore the role of these technological platforms as more-than-human or other-than-human actors within these relations of care. This dissertation is intended to be a human-centric exploration of digital life; I operate from this principle because my interlocutors really did not think about the platforms and technologies they used as actors within their networks and spaces, but rather as infrastructure that enabled and facilitated human relations and connections. There is, of course, a theoretical argument to be made that technologies and platforms are non-human or more-than-human actors within these networks of care. However, I have made a deliberate choice not to theorize care in this way because my interlocutors understood platforms and technologies as infrastructure that enabled human networks and relations of care rather than

as more-than-human extensions of care. That being said, it is my contention that my interlocutors experienced and understood digital spacemaking as a form of care.

### Making Space/Spacemaking

In the anthropological literature, place is typically theorized through Massey's (2005) work as a 'constellation of processes' that are constantly changing, open, and unfinished (Li and Alencar 2023). Place has been theorized as both a physical and symbolic location, as a social hierarchy, and "the niche occupied...by a thing or idea" (Li and Alencar 2023, 3). These framings combine elements of the imagined and the actual; the social, cultural, and political; the emotional and the social; and the geographic and the physical (Hjorth 2014). Place is a construct, in this sense – one which people continuously (re)make, change, and (re)signify to make sense or meaning in and of their experiences, affinities, affiliations, and identities through specific networks of social relations (Li and Alencar 2023; Hjorth 2014; Hjorth and Pink 2014; Magan and Padgett 2021).

Massey distinguishes between space and place. She argues that space refers to the dimensions – physical, virtual, affective, or otherwise – in which we live, while place refers to a specific location or destination. Place is inextricable from space in this sense, and how we produce or create space – what Massey terms spatiality – is the product of social relations. That is to say, how a space is created or constituted is always already entangled in the social relations and structures that occupy or constitute that space. The notion of "placemaking" – that is, the act of creating and making place, physically or socially – comes to anthropology via urban studies and urban planning, where placemaking was conceptualized in relation to the role people play in turning public spaces into places with meaning (Hespanhol 2018). As Blum-Ross (2013) notes, the process through which "spaces" are transformed into socialized and personalized "places"

from which individual and collective affiliations emerge is often a highly contested process, which often involves invisible struggles for power, position, and control of both the environment and who is allowed access to it (Massey 1998; Blum-Ross 2013).

Given the global spread of geospatial technologies, smartphones, computers, and locative media, one must increasingly consider how these technologies create sense of space, place, and co-presence. Hjorth and Pink (2014) have argued that social media practices have created new forms of intimacy. These practices have become a key part of how people negotiate their online and offline worlds (Hjorth and Pink 2014). Co-presence via social networks gives people a sense of comfort and joy; this kind of sharing enables the user to share “emotional gestures in a particular time and space...with friends in other co-present spaces...[while] physically located in a café, [they] also simultaneously inhabit online localities whereby physically absent friends are ‘absent presences’” (Hjorth and Pink 2014, 5). Social media, therefore, enables new forms of co-presence that are not simply about being connected, but that are characterized, made, and experienced through online forms of visibility that is always already relational and entangled with offline worlds (Hjorth and Pink 2014).

Hjorth and Pink (2014) and others were particularly focused on the oscillation between our online and offline worlds in relation to our sense of emplacement. They understood online and offline to be constitutive parts of the same place, meaning that we move through the online world as if it is as material as the offline. Digital life in the pandemic complicates this slightly – in some ways, the online became even more indistinguishable from and embedded in the offline. On the other hand, the offline became so heavily restricted and inaccessible that the online started to become a distinctly separate place for some. A different way to approach the online/offline divide is through the process of disembedding. Giddens defines disembedding as a

long-term process that involves “the lifting out of social relations from local contexts of interaction and their restructuring across indefinite spans of time-space” (Giddens 1990 in Tait 2014, 7). This disembedding makes it possible for individuals to leave their physical or geographic community in a metaphorical sense via online; this provides a kind of social mobility and organized paths out of the local without ever taking physical leave of the locality. The digital enables a new kind of togetherness – that is, a sense of belonging and identity that is based on sharing personal and private moments and experiences online (Marino 2015). Online spaces that promote and sustain a sense of digital togetherness can emerge as comfortable places where a community, sub-culture or group feels at home and emplaced.

My interlocutors often thought about and referred to the digital realms they inhabited as spaces and used the language of “making space”, “holding space”, and protecting their community’s space. Their usage of space is not necessarily in line with the literature; they conceptualized their actions as making space for each other and making space to upload and connect their physically displaced pre-existing communities. From a phenomenological perspective, Twitch channels and Discord servers are not cut and dry places; that is, they are not specified, socialized, and personalized places from which my interlocutors and their communities drew affiliations. Rather, they entered these spaces with said affiliations mostly already formed from in-person places that were now inaccessible because of public health measures<sup>6</sup>. While some of my interlocutors – like Liese – were trying to create long-term queer digital places, the majority were responding directly to the pandemic and serving a short to medium term need for hospitable digital social spaces. Liese is a producer, and the real beating

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<sup>6</sup> This experience is specific to my interlocutors and their entry points to Twitch. Many Twitch users, however, may come to the platform because of a general interest in gaming or other livestreaming events without such formed affiliations or affinities.

heart of The Underground, a digital drag bar hosted on Twitch.tv. Liese was also an artist and had started streaming art content to Twitch before the pandemic. Before the pandemic, she had struggled to get her friends from the community onto the platform. Then, in the initial weeks of lockdown, a friend and local drag performer Courtney messaged Liese about helping her host a viewing party on Twitch; Liese and Courtney would go on to start the Underground following the success of that one off livestream. The channel evolved over the course of the pandemic into a full digital drag bar, which Liese described now as an “organic self-perpetuating machine”. When we spoke about the early days of the Underground, Liese laughed as she described how those early streams were “really funky” looking; “I knew what I was doing and [the stream] ran smooth[ly], it's just...well they didn't look cool or advanced like our stuff looks now,” Liese confided in reference to the high production value of their work in 2022.

Liese envisioned creating something that was more than a liminal or transitional space that would disappear when public health restrictions lifted; instead, she saw digital drag, digital queer performance spaces and digital queer community spaces as a hopefully long-term – and potentially revolutionary – shift in artistic, creative, and community practices. Once Liese and Courtney had established their Twitch channel, Liese began teaching the community technical skills through community software workshops and individual lessons. She became a kind of godmother to other performers, a reservoir of technical knowledge and institutional memory, and in some cases, a seeding bank for start-up funds. Liese reminisced about this time with me; “I was just like guarding my platform, creating this space that was about wanting to support people and big them up...thankfully, when people needed a space, when performers needed a space to perform, I could provide that”.

Of course, we can think about place as being made not only through physical manifestations but also via the relationships they contain and the embodied storytelling practices they enable. In this sense, varying artistic mediums, like digital performance, can be interventions into the experience of being in place or emplaced. This leads me to the question of whether my interlocutors were engaging in placemaking – as the literature understands it – or in something else? By and large, they were not trying to make digital places, but the notion of place at this time was also very complicated. It is my interpretation that what they were attempting to do was to create new social spaces within the margins and corners of pre-existing digital places. Given this, I use the term spacemaking rather than placemaking – in part, because it is more reflective of the realities of my interlocutors’ digital presences and relationships, and in part because it reflects their own use of the language around making space. Moreover, I employ the term spacemaking to invoke the concept of social space; Nisbett’s (2006) understanding of social space as the unshaped potentiality of a place that emerges when others enter that space and challenge or contest its constituent social relationships and identities is key to understanding queer presence on platforms like Twitch.

Twitch was and remains a highly heteronormative, cisnormative, white masculinist place for gamers and its social relationships emphasized this by attacking women, feminized, racialized, queer, and trans\* communities and employing racist, misogynistic, transphobic, and homophobic rhetoric. The migration of queer streamers into this hostile place – even if just at the margins or insular corners of Twitch – threatened those dynamics. As the anthropological literature on emplacement demonstrates, online identities are deeply rooted in and inseparable from our everyday performances of the self and “even online, hierarchies of place come into operation to restrict this identity play” (Nisbett 2006, 141). Twitch’s core constituency came to

Twitch to be enveloped in this very specific hierarchical dynamic – the insularity of Twitch’s user base prior to the pandemic is what attracted them. As queer streamers migrated to Twitch during the pandemic, there was a reactionary response to reinforce these norms of behaviour through reporting queer streamers (see chapter five), coordinated harassment campaigns (see chapter five), spamming channels with violent language and comments in their live chats, and even sending private messages (called whispers on Twitch) to my interlocutors’ channels to bombard them with unsolicited and non-consensual sexually explicit images.

Me: So, can we talk about barriers to streaming on Twitch? I can think of a few off the top of my head.

Nicholas: Oh my god, I have this one person who keeps coming onto our channel. They’re officially banned now, but you can get ban requests from people, so they can message you and request to be unbanned. So I keep getting messages from them which is so toxic, just the idea that this can keep happening. They kept messaging us through the ban requests like “you’re gay” and then they also send penises.

Me: Like actual penises?

Nicholas: Sometimes it’s like through lines, you know? Like they’ve drawn a dick with keystrokes. But yes, also actual pictures of penises. I replied, “you’re gay”, but I get penises every time I log on. Like, ‘there’s my morning penis, alright there we go’

The majority of these actions, of course, constitute sexual violence<sup>7</sup>. The presence of other constituencies in what was previously a very exclusionary place collapsed the insularity of that place – much like women walking through that café in Bangalore disrupted the displays of masculine sexuality there (Nisbett 2006) – reducing it to a social space full of potentials that were now not fully exercised. And so, the reaction to this perceived threat to place resulted in stochastic terrorism, harassment, epistemic violence, and various forms of sexual, gender-based,

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<sup>7</sup> Sexual violence can be broadly defined as a sexual act or acts targeting a person’s sexuality, sexual identity, gender identity or gender expression. Sexual violence can be physical and/or psychological and includes acts that are committed, threatened or attempted against a person without their consent. Sexual violence is a continuum that includes, but is not limited to, sexual assault, rape, sexual harassment, stalking, indecent exposure and sexual exploitation (Petit-Thorne 2020).

and racial violence. The presence of queer, trans\* and QTBIPOC streamers on Twitch – and the communities forming around them – led to a struggle or contestation for control of the process of emplacement, in which the cis/heteronormative white masculinist gamer constituency pushed against queer emplacement by trying to run them off the platform. This kind of digital environment is often more than disturbing enough to discourage the participation of marginalized groups in a given space (Kendall 1996).

Like with Facebook, Instagram, and Zoom, my interlocutors faced barriers to that process of emplacement on Twitch. As a producer at The Underground, Emm, told me,

“Queer content is just a drop in the bucket of Twitch content. I don’t think frankly that queer creators matter to Twitch. It’s still Prime Gaming. In my mind, it was Biqtch Puddin’ who led that migration, and I think the reason that so many people are doing queer content on Twitch is because one person was a gamer. Which is wild. Biqtch had a platform from Dragula and was already on Twitch and that first show on Twitch when quarantine started brought in so many artists, everyone was like ‘oh! This is what we will do!’ And it’s better than Instagram, you can build a community around [your channel], but only if you do your live show and then *hide*”.

The use of platforms was not exclusively or linear – that is, my interlocutors were using and weaving together multiple platforms at any given time in an attempt to create safe spaces – but each platform had a period of time in which its popularity and centrality peaked. Twitch was certainly at the center for the longest period of time, coming into vogue in the fall of 2020 and remaining a key platform for my interlocutors into late 2021. However, the hostile environment on Twitch ultimately led to a shift to using private Discord servers (see chapter five). This move to Discord came late in my fieldwork, and as such, I cannot say much about it conclusively as I do not have the data. From preliminary observation, it does seem to me that the nature and structure of privacy in Discord may enable the process of emplacement.

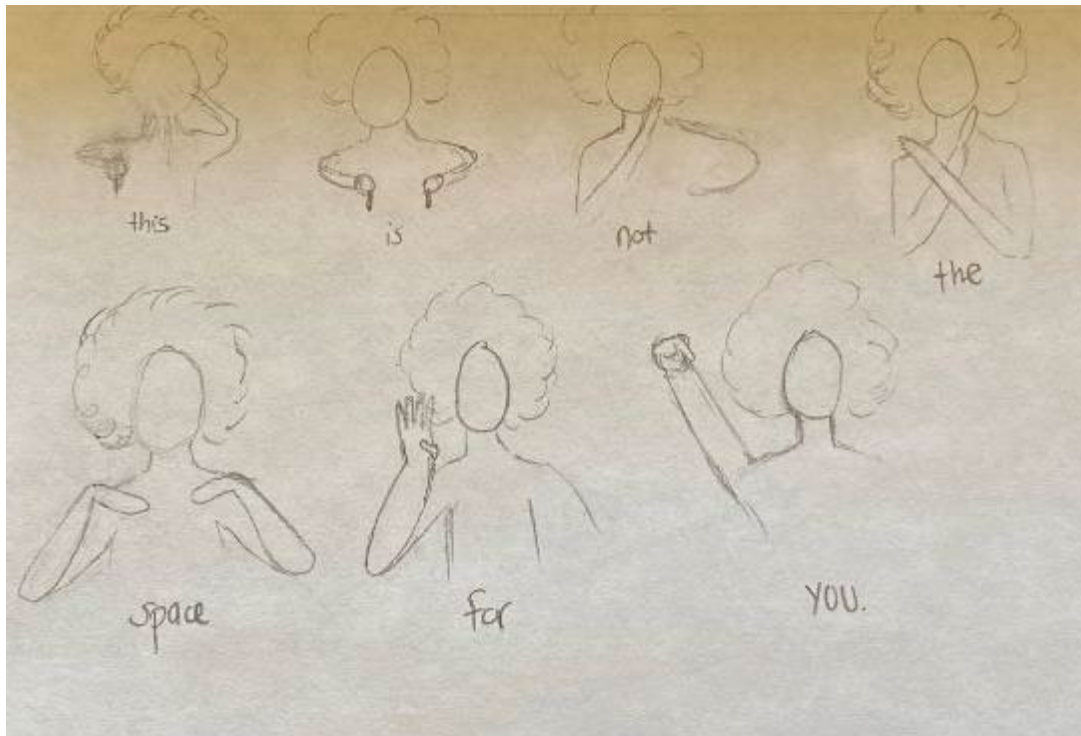
## Spacemaking as Care Practice

Some performers centered spacemaking and community care in their performance practices by taking up explicitly political stances or messaging. The Monarchs, a Toronto drag house known for its inclusion of diverse styles of drag and its showcasing of trans\* and gender diverse performers, notably began their Twitch shows with a series of political statements. Each Twitch show I attended over the course of 2020-2021 began with a land acknowledgment and a call for audience members to learn about the land they were on. The land acknowledgment would always be followed by the setting of community rules, in which the hosts would affirm their support for Black Lives Matter and the Land Back movements before declaring some variation of “if you don’t support these movements, this is not the space for you”. One of the Monarchs, Noah, even went so far as to choreograph a short voguing<sup>8</sup> routine that he would perform with the phrase “this is not the space for you” at each performance (Figure 4). Noah would slowly enunciate each word of the phrase as he moved through the arm movements – “this” pointing down with his right hand; “is” pointing down with his left hand; “not” crossing his right arm over his chest; “the” crossing his left arm to form an “x” across his chest; “space” bringing his hands to rest flat in front of his collarbones; “for” holding up four fingers on his right hand; and “you” pointing at the camera/audience.

*Figure 4: A sketch of Noah’s “this is not the space for you” choreography in my fieldnotes.*

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<sup>8</sup> Voguing is a campy style of dance that consists of stylized poses. In wider popular culture, voguing typically takes catwalk fashion models as inspiration. In queer culture, voguing is a foundational part of Ballroom Culture, originating from African American and Latino drag and gender performers in the 1980s Harlem Ballroom scene. This iteration of voguing is less focused on symmetrical linear movements (called the catwalk) and includes spins, dips, duckwalking, and other tricks.



When I interviewed members of this drag house, they all spoke to how the setting of these boundaries with their audience and these declarations of political solidarity and community expectations were a very intentional political act. Their shows themselves were often very silly and joyful and did not engage with explicitly political content, but the creation of what they referred to as a “safe space” for their audiences, their fellow performers, and each other at the outset of a livestream was both a necessity and an intentional declaration. As one of the leaders of that house, Micah, told me “we individually have strong and very similar political beliefs. And whether or not that’s something that our individual pieces of art are communicating, it’s important to the spaces we set up and the way that we try to form our shows”. Another house member, Nicholas, a white trans-masculine drag king, explained that early on they had decided to create a space that was safe for marginalized community members while still centering positivity and joy. Nicholas told me: “celebration is a big part of our channel because too many people ask us about our trauma and trans\* people watching the channel don’t want or need to be

retraumatized.” Nicholas placed a significant emphasis on that last point – the safety of their audience, made up of trans\*, racialized, and other marginalized queer people, was central to their performance practices. I think about the “safe spaces” my interlocutors try to create as another way of sustaining social life through harm reduction – a preventative care tactic that seeks to create spaces free of violence rather than react to violence after the fact.

The concept of a “safe space” is marred in cultural debates around their use and/or weaponization on college campuses. Within that debate, there are two core positions and definitions of a safe space: (1), that a safe space is a place where students with different ideas can isolate themselves from those who disagree with them, and (2), that a safe space is a space where students of diverse backgrounds are given the supports they need to be comfortable in open and honest dialogue and learning. The former is associated with creating a classroom atmosphere in which topics or debates are stifled and has prompted vigorous debates around freedom of speech, while the latter is more associated with recognizing and meeting the differing needs of diverse students by providing them with appropriate supports under the assumption that comfort leads to valuable learning opportunities and outcomes. My interlocutors’ understandings of safe spaces are undoubtedly mired in that debate and yet do not line up neatly with a particular side; they see safe spaces as both protectionist spaces that keep out those who disagree with their existence, and as a space in which the exchange of diverse experiences and knowledges are enabled by creating a baseline of safety and common rules and in which freedom of expression for queer people is therefore enabled and protected. Within queer history, the term safe space can be traced back to before Stonewall, with the term having been used in neighbourhood-based organizing efforts to signify a space in which queer people could be open about their identities with a lower

risk of societal and/or legal repercussions (Hanhardt 2013). My interlocutors' engagement with the term is more aligned with this history than with the contemporary popular usage of the term.

### Moving Towards Care

Fran is a white drag queen in her twenties who hosted commercially successful shows in the Village<sup>9</sup>. Her shows are primarily comedic and cater to audiences of middle class white gay men and straight women with disposal income seeking politically neutral entertainment.

Nonetheless, Fran still understands drag and her performance practices to be inherently political acts caught in a delicate balancing act between delivering entertainment and escapism and using her platform effectively. "It's touch and go," she said to me on a November evening over Zoom, "you're trying to feel things out to be like what is the most ethical thing for me to do? And for me and this particular time, it is that I need to empower the voices and uplift the voices of Black queer and trans people". In June 2020, Fran hosted a series of after-shows on Zoom that were simultaneously livestreamed to Facebook, in which she and her guests read and discussed academic articles on critical race theory, breaking down their ideas into layman's terms and relating their understandings of these theories to the Black Lives Matter protests of that summer. This sort of make-shift reading group was one tactic Fran employed to talk to her audiences about race, but in particular to talk about whiteness and the upholding of white supremacy with audiences that were more likely to be white, middle to upper-class, and homonormative.

De Certeau (1984) delineates between strategies, the means through which institutions and structures (re)produce relations of power, and the actions that the disempowered take to unsettle or diverge from prescribed conventions and structures of power, which he terms tactics. I

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<sup>9</sup> Fran has largely retired from performing since this research ended due in part to the constraints of her new job and in larger part to the toll her dance style and signature tricks have taken on her joints.

understand the attempts of my interlocutors to undermine the dominant power structures of the Village and to unsettle the prescribed conventions of digital spaces like Twitch through the intentional practice of spacemaking to be tactics in this sense. Whereas the Monarchs focused on spacemaking as a tactic for unsettling relations of power within the community and online forums, Fran's approach attempted to subvert those same power structures by disseminating the ideas of Black intellectuals in digestible and actionable ways. Likewise, Bini and the other burlesque performers intentionally stage and program bodies that are coded as transgressive as a tactic of resistance to dominant modes of storytelling and imagining.

Violet is an Indigenous 2-Spirit playwright, burlesque dancer, and performer based in Toronto. Violet is in their thirties and was hitting a period of commercial success and recognition for their previous one-person show about intergenerational trauma. Their speaking voice was soft, warm, and melodic, contrasting with the booming pain-tinged roars I had seen flow from them on stage. Today, they wore a sweatshirt and eyeglasses as the white cord of their headphones peaked out from between strands of the long dark hair framing their jovial round face. Violet had an aura of perpetual radiance about them that shown through cameras and screens even in the most casual of conversations and an indelible warmth. When we first connected in the fall of 2020, Violet was working workshopping a new play which centered around an Indigenous family coming together to grieve the death of their matriarch. They confided that many of the anecdotes in the play are from their own experiences; "but it's not confessional!" they explain.

"I take little things....and I weave them together so that it's not as raw for me to tell some of the things that are hard for me to deal with...but it's not confessional because I'm not the one speaking it, but also it's weaved in a way that is safe. It's safe for me to hear, it's safe for me to perform, and then it's somehow still rooted in a reality and a truth. Like I'm telling my truth while still keeping everyone safe, including the witnesses".

Violet feels a deep sense of responsibility for the safety of their audiences – who they call witnesses – as well as the performers in their play. Care is central to their creative process: “if I’m inviting you in, it’s my responsibility to keep you safe. I want you to feel comfortable because we’re all holding each other. When it comes to theatre and storytelling, I just want care to be a baseline”, they told me.

*Figure 5: A sketch of Violet from my fieldnotes.*



In a moderated Zoom conversation with another Indigenous artist in April 2021, Violet explained that when care is central to artistic practices, it gives permission for artists and audiences alike to feel more deeply and to lessen the shame of feeling fully and intensely. Their co-panelist, Stevie, added that care allowed space for the sharing of artistic truths, but “different people’s truths might be someone else’s trigger”. As the conversation went on, the centrality of care as a creative and artistic process in and of itself kept re-emerging. It was that care, they

explained, that enabled the cultivation of physical and digital space in which to foster and build community. Like Fran and the Monarchs, Stevie described the desire to make and hold space for the always already marginalized as something that emerged from being in institutional spaces that could not or would not accommodate transgression. They said that those spaces were so rigid in their structures that they felt like “a tool for somebody else’s vision” and that centering different ways of engaging with one another – that is, centering care as a way of being and relating to one another and as a way of creating space and art – was how they could best undermine those prescribed structures.

Like my interlocutors, I am concerned with how care and care practices might unsettle existing social structures. Buch (2015) notes that how care is practiced depends on who is drawn into relations of care and the role that institutions play or refuse in shaping those dynamics. The networks of performers and audiences that I observed my interlocutors form sought to protect, support, and maintain social security within their networks in response institutional betrayal and violence within the Church-Wellesley Village. As the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020 spread throughout Canada, queer artists and performers began to call on venues, producers, and institutions within the community to address issues of systemic racism within their hiring and production practices. Panels, events, and open letters calling for structural reforms in these institutions were plentiful throughout the summer of 2020, but once those public events became less frequent and visible, individual artists and performers continued to talk about their feelings of institutional betrayal (see Smith and Freyd 2014) and the need for change in their livestreams and on social media. Likewise, livestreams, social media, panels, and other live digital events were utilized by performers to discuss structural violence against QTBIPOC artists on digital platforms, to educate audiences about anti-sex worker policies and the effects of FOSTA-SESTA

(see chapter five for discussion), and to raise funds for one another. Maintaining the social security of these communities was central to the ethos of those producing or running Twitch channels and other live digital shows. A producer of one popular Twitch channel described the pandemic as an opportunity to “force a reckoning” of the culture in the Village and potentially permanently transform relationships between producers, performers, and audiences in the industry. Ultimately, I view these varying practices of holding each other up, bringing communities together, and creating emotional, psychological, and financial social safety nets to be practices of care employed tactically in response to structural and institutional violence.

Culture and culturally specific emotions shape what we understand to be appropriate and significant forms of care (Black 2018). In this case, I see a sharp divide between the institutions that loom large over the Village and the individuals that constitute the larger Toronto queer community. I conceptualize the networks of queer artists and audiences who were so deeply engaged in and concerned by care practices during the pandemic as communities of care, or, social groups united by shared practices of caring for others. This conceptual framework avoids presuppositions of a structural or institutional organizer of these communities; rather, communities of care are assemblages of a variety of actors with differing commitments and motivations engaged in a variety of multidirectional relational stances. Community members are entangled and interpellated in varying ways but are nevertheless called into relations of providing and receiving (Ong and Steinmuller 2021). Those relations of providing and receiving also necessarily shift and remain unstable; for example, artists like Violet who strive to provide care must too also receive care from other corners of these communities.

The care practices my interlocutors engage in are inherently performative, both because they take place within or adjacent to staged performances and because they center reflexivity.

Reflexivity, or a “performer’s attention to the form and content of their communicative actions as vectors for meaning-making” (Black 2018, 84), is central to performance. Anthropological work on care performances like illness narratives and laments demonstrate that reflexivity is likewise central to care practices (Black 2015; Black 2018; Feld 1982; Kleinman 1988). While the conscious and intentional discussions of care in the work of artists like Violet are most visibly entangled with care practices, I contend that the reflexive politically engaged and activist-oriented performance work many of my interlocutors took up during the pandemic are also care performances. Over the course of the pandemic, the thematic content of digital performances across the community reflected a larger political and cultural shift towards a prioritization of care and accountability. A number of drag and gender performers spoke to me about becoming more politically engaged and doing more explicitly political performances in responses to Black Lives Matter, violence against trans\* people, violence against sex workers, and the Land Back movement. One gender performer, a community elder named Elsie who was known for doing long-form one-woman show style numbers about personal histories and political figures, spoke to me about how her work had become more political in response to the events of 2020-2021: “my art has become more political...and I’m just not interested in fluff. Not interested in it”. Similarly, Fran explained the politics of their performance work thusly:

“I feel that it is a drag queen or gender performer’s responsibility to be involved politically. Drag in and of itself is a political statement...I think people have misunderstood that to mean ‘oh I’m putting on this armour’. But the radical part of drag for me is...I’m taking my power back. In that, it’s like, you’re taking your power back and so you need to [also] give it to other people.”

I contend that this reflexive political work further serves to sustain the social safety of these artists’ communities of care. While they may not sustain physical life or directly engage the concept of care, they serve the same social purpose to protect and support the most marginalized

members of their communities. Moreover, many of my interlocutors framed these actions as being directly related to and inseparable from principles of community and care.

Communities of care are multi-directional assemblages; in practice, this means that not everyone's care needs are congruent. While some of my interlocutors were taking explicitly political stances in their work, others spoke of how exhausting creating politically engaged content had been and their desire to move away from identity-based or trauma-based performance pieces. By late 2020, a number of my interlocutors were opting instead to center queer and trans\* joy and excellence in their performance practices as a radical act of care. A Two-Spirit drag performer, Elke, summed this sentiment up best during a Twitch livestream on Trans Day of Remembrance (TDOR) in 2020. Speaking about how so many TDOR events were explicitly hiring performers to perform pieces about trauma and violence rather than making attempts to showcase the breadth of artistry, creativity, and work of trans\* artists, they said "don't expect that this [trauma] is all that this community is going to do or be. I am more than that, we are more than that". Time and time again, these conversations lead me back to Violet's words: "I just think," they sighed, "that we need to be looking towards telling stories of healing, rather than trauma". The refusal to engage or (re)produce social relations, spatial relations, and/or dominant narratives and representations of trans\* and queer life – on which I elaborate in the chapters that follow – is a care tactic in which these artists intentionally center harm reduction, harm prevention, and healing in their creative processes.

I do not seek to establish a binary framework between trauma and joy. Rather I am framing queer joy as emerging, in this case, as an intentional refutation of and refusal to engage in and reproduce trauma culture. While binaries are not always inherently problematic, in this case setting up trauma and joy as a binary oppositional framework has the potential to flatten

nuance and ultimately resolidify reductionist narratives about queer life. That is ultimately unhelpful. Instead, I am framing queer and trans\* joy within my interlocutors work as a direct response to contemporary manifestations of *trauma culture* and its accordant narratives of queer life and death. While I write about queer joy as a refusal of trauma narratives, I am not arguing that these concepts necessarily exist in binary opposition to one another, as this too has a flattening effect that may contribute to reproducing reductionist ideas about what queer and trans\* lives can be.

Finally, I wish to note that if communities of care are multi-directional, this also means that my interlocutors received care in addition to giving it. While I have focused here on the ways in which they created the conditions for caring for others or directly engaged in care tactics, they also needed care themselves at various points throughout the pandemic. If we understand spacemaking practices to be care, my interlocutors also received care from the maintenance of these spaces. That is not to say that receiving care or being cared for only looks like taking up space; sometimes care manifested as taking time off, or receiving the financial supports I discuss elsewhere in this dissertation, to name a few. It is important to note that while I have centered their care tactics, my interlocutors were members of these communities of care themselves and were experiencing the same needs and forms of precarity I describe in the chapters that follow. Moreover, in the preceding paragraphs, I have alluded to the exhaustion some of my interlocutors experienced in doing this work. Ironically, for some of my interlocutors, taking on care work during the pandemic is what led them to need to be cared for in return. This is why the multi-directionality of communities of care is so crucial to sustaining the life of the community.

## Conclusion

In exploring my interlocutors' experiments with community-building and spacemaking online, I argue that my interlocutors' creative processes can be understood as forms of care practices specific to the time, space, and technology of online life during the pandemic. Spacemaking, as my interlocutors articulated it, was intertwined with what they understood to be transgressive and/or political acts embedded in their artistic practices. Theorizing care as a process which connects those who provide care and those who need care in order to meet one another's needs and sustain the life of the community, I argue that my interlocutors' political acts of spacemaking are a kind of tactic employed to sustain the community's life, which I term care tactics. This understanding of care and its uses underpins my arguments about the centering of queer joy as a care tactic in the proceeding chapters.

## **Chapter 4: Accessing Digital Togetherness**

### *Scenes from a Drag Queen's Pandemic Birthday*

In 2021, Elsie celebrated her seventy-fifth birthday with a hundred of her closest friends and admirers in a Zoom drag show. Her friends – some of whom were performers themselves, others were people she knew out of drag – hosted the event, with performances from Elsie herself and tributes from performers across Toronto. Elsie's children and several lifelong friends were also in attendance, giving toasts about her life before she became Elsie. It was a closed Zoom event, meaning that the space was password protected; Elsie had circulated the meeting password amongst the queer arts community several weeks prior. Early in the evening, Elsie's friends surprised her by playing a video message from William Shatner, which they had commissioned from Cameo. The two-minute birthday tribute from the actor delighted Elsie – while the video played fullscreen, Elsie's face was visible in her little Zoom box pinned at the top of the screen. When the video ended, one of the hosts, an experienced drag king who had known Elsie for years, exclaimed “how do I follow William Shatner?!” to raucous laughter. The tone of the celebration quickly became more somber as the host began to pay tribute to the legendary drag queen Michelle Ross, who had passed away just days prior. Elsie was a very community-oriented person; despite this night being a celebration of her, she brought the community together to mourn Michelle's passing and dedicated the show entirely to her memory, to communal mourning and to the celebration of her legacy.

When Elsie and I spoke several weeks later, she explained that community was always the most important thing to her. The birthday show had been a fundraiser for several local queer organisations and, as aforementioned, had become a space for a community memorial. Moreover, she had intentionally tried to create an intergenerational space in pushing her friends, family, and

older community members to attend, which has been difficult. Intergenerational queer spaces in general, and particularly online, had been something of a rarity. In fact, this was one of the only queer digital spaces where I saw elders or seniors who were not Elsie and the handful of other queer elders who regularly appeared at events. For Elsie, this turnout of seniors was an accomplishment in and of itself, though she expressed a sadness that her sister and some of her dear friends had been unable to attend because they could not figure out how to access Zoom.

“I have twin sisters eight years younger than me. One of them uses technology, but the other one is terrified of it. So she didn’t see the birthday show for her brother turning 75. She couldn’t tune in. So our sister shared the William Shatner thing with her, right? And she is so unconnected to what’s going on in the world, to what you can do online. And I say this with sadness in my heart, she said to me ‘I didn’t know you were friends with William Shatner’. Like she is so unconnected, she doesn’t know you can go online and pay – what, \$3000?, I don’t know what his rate is – and get a celebrity to sing you happy birthday.”

She went on to describe how terrified one of the emcees, her dear friend who was in their 60s, was to work with Zoom. Elsie held a personal mandate for herself, she explained, to make a difference in the community, but also to help serve queer elders. Elsie could easily speak for hours about all the examples of the digital divide she encountered in her work and of the importance of promoting digital literacy, of supporting parts of the community that otherwise had become isolated and abandoned by the digital pivot. Elsie’s observations that the digital pivot had left scores of queer people behind were right – that is, they were supported and backed up by data collected throughout the pandemic, as well as the observations of myself and my interlocutors.

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## Introduction

The previous chapter dealt with my interlocutors attempts to create safe community spaces on pre-existing digital platforms, as well as their attempts to dismantle some of the digital barriers to entry that their communities faced in participating in digital queer life. That conversation is woefully incomplete without a discussion of accessibility and the digital divide. I use the term accessibility in a broad sense, encompassing both the design of products, services, and environments for people with disabilities *and* the general ability for other marginalized communities to easily reach, enter, and use a product, service, or environment. This is important to clarify because while accessibility for persons with disabilities is of the utmost importance, we must also make space for the fact that many spaces – particularly in the Village – are inaccessible to other equity-deserving communities because of their identities. These are intersecting issues that should be considered together as attitudinal access barriers.

As I argued in chapter three, how my interlocutors crafted community spaces online was deeply shaped by their understandings of care and community responsibilities. While many of my interlocutors actively worked to make more accessible online spaces and to protect those spaces, I would be remiss not to unpack how being present and fully participating in digital spaces can be deeply inaccessible to many people of various identities for a variety of intersecting structural reasons. This chapter outlines some of the barriers to participation in digital life that my interlocutors and their audiences experienced to varying degrees throughout the pandemic, with a particular focus on the elderly, those living in unsafe situations, and those who were experiencing financial precarity. I put these barriers into conversation with the many ways in which the digital pivot did make queer spaces more accessible for other subsections of the queer community, particularly those with disabilities and those who were unable to be

physically present in the Village for a myriad of reasons. I am not arguing here that digital platforms are inherently good/accessible or bad/inaccessible; rather, I am opening space for these contradictions to exist.

*Figure 6: A drawing of Elsie in my notebook.*



### The Pandemic Digital Divide

Digital participation was a complex issue in my fieldwork; while virtual spaces opened new avenues for participation and made queer performance accessible to audiences who could not attend in-person performances for various reasons, the digital pivot also wrought new barriers to full participation for my interlocutors. My interlocutors highlighted three key accessibility barriers that emerged in the shift to digital: technical knowledge and the digital divide; financial and material barriers; and structural violence. The queer performing arts community

encompassed a wide-range of demographics, including people from different age ranges and financial situations, different comfort levels and experiences with digital technologies, varying access to the internet and to space to perform or record, and some stuck in home situations that were not always queer-friendly or safe for them during lockdown. These circumstances came to highlight the various ways in which the digital divide manifested for queer folks during the pandemic.

The digital divide refers to the disparity that exists between people with access to internet technology and those without (Van Dijk 2020). In short, the pandemic made visible what many have known since internet technologies become ubiquitous – that some people can readily access the internet and its applications for work and/or for fun, while many communities and individuals continue to face a myriad of barriers to accessing online resources. Some barriers may be financial – that is to say, that some people may not be able to afford a stable internet connection, a computer, or other device required to stay digitally connected. In addition to the cost, some people are unable to access the internet because they live in remote locations beyond a consistent network reach, or a connectivity barrier (ODLAN 2022). This was my own experience for several months of the pandemic, in which I lived with my father outside of a small town in New Brunswick with extremely intermittent access to low-bandwidth satellite internet that could not support videoconferencing.

Other barriers were environmental; a key barrier for many queer people during pandemic lockdowns was the lack of privacy or a safe space in their shared living space to participate in queer digital life. This was of particular concern for closeted queer people, particularly those living with their families, as well as for queer seniors living in long-term care facilities and queer adults who were reliant on home care. For them, concealing their queerness meant avoiding overt

expressions of homophobia or transphobia from their care provider, which may result in better treatment. There are also a number of literacy barriers, which the Ontario Digital Literacy and Access Network (ODLAN) uses to refer to people who *can* get online but who cannot navigate digital sources because they do not know how to find what they need, how to make use of an application's features, or how to find content in their language, to name a few (ODLAN 2022). For people with physical or cognitive disabilities, online spaces may not be set up with accessibility in mind, which may limit their participation in digital life as well.

The pandemic also brought its own unique barriers to accessing digital worlds. Lockdowns meant that access to public space became restricted, which in turn meant that spaces like campuses and libraries that might provide free public Wi-Fi or loan out devices and computers were no longer available. Being confined to one's residence with housemates or family also impacted many people's relationships, social lives, and mental health, in addition to restricting their privacy. For some, that resulted in more in-depth engagements with digital worlds to fill their social needs, while others withdrew. Moreover, as will become clear in the proceeding pages of this dissertation, not all online spaces are safe for marginalized communities. Beyond the typical scams, phishing, and other predatory behaviour that lurks online, there are also deep pockets of the internet – particularly on social media – where transphobic, homophobic, racist, sexist, antisemitic, and other bigoted harassment campaigns thrive.

One's experience of the pandemic is undoubtedly shaped by socio-economic factors, but also by the intersections of one gendered, raced, classed, dis/abled, ethnic, political, and sexual identities. Likewise, one's experience of the digital divide is not limited to questions of access alone. As Slama argues, the internet has long been imagined as a “catalyst for social equality and inclusion...based on the assumption that...if everybody has access to the online world, offline

inequalities will ultimately disappear as well”. (2021, 296). In the West, the internet has been fantasized as not just a transformative technology (which it undoubtedly is), but as a revolutionary tool of social development (which it has not yet been). The internet is a technology that is open to anyone wishing to navigate or add to it, “and this hypothetical equality of all Internet users – as reflected in the construction and the design of the Internet and its endpoints – is an important aspect in explaining why the optimism concerning the transformative power of the Internet is more than a vision of Western politicians, but rather is firmly rooted in the libertarian worldview of the developers and early users of the Internet” (Kuebler 2011, 40). The internet has long been thought of as inherently amenable, as a tool ready to accommodate new iterations of social interaction, spatiality, and relationality. As Kuebler notes, however, the reality is that even basic access to the internet remains uneven and problematically dispersed along pre-existing socio-economic and geopolitical lines. The internet is also largely unable to escape the trappings of its own making; before its use became widespread, it was characterized by a userbase of primarily affluent white men with a high degree of cultural capital, which shaped the early internet into a highly insular, elitist, less-than-public space.

In practice, the power of the internet remains concentrated in populations who have always had access to power and resources. Accessing the internet is not free; it requires increasingly expensive devices and internet or data plans to connect those devices. Videoconferencing requires even more sophisticated devices and, for many, upgraded internet speeds to maintain connectivity. For some of my interlocutors, maintaining these costs was already extremely prohibitive. On top of this, navigating how to use these tools and technologies is not always intuitive and often presumes a level of digital literacy that many people do not have. Even while being marginalized on the axes of gender and sexuality, the majority of my interlocutors largely

still experienced their online worlds from a place of economic, geopolitical, technical, and epistemic privilege.

### Literacy and Access

The majority of my interlocutors were children of the 1980s and 1990s; they came of age on the internet, grew up using digital cameras, learned to edit photographs and videos for social media, and had kept up with the latest developments in technology and social media sites. The majority of them lived in relatively safe home situations – putting the financial precarity of the pandemic and the housing affordability crisis aside – in that they lived in queer-friendly households. They were millennials or Gen Z, with at least a basic amount of technical skills and computer literacy; access to smartphones, laptops, microphones, and cameras; and enough social capital and networks of relations to get access to any equipment, technologies, and skills that they lacked. Individuals like Elsie – who celebrated her 75<sup>th</sup> birthday during my fieldwork – and other community elders who lacked these basics from the outset of the pandemic and who had less access to help or support really highlighted the amount of real privilege (materially, socially, and knowledge/skills-based) that my interlocutors had even as members of an increasingly marginalized and persecuted community. I highlight this not to discount the intersections of marginalization at which many of my interlocutors and our wider community exist – in fact, the following chapters do just the opposite – but to emphasize how varied pandemic experiences were across queer communities in Toronto, and to acknowledge the material realities of my interlocutors. My interlocutors would be the first to tell you about their positions of relative privilege within the community; they were extremely aware of these facts and many of them actively sought to work with and to support queer elders, queer people living in rural or small communities, QTBIPOC artists, disabled artists, and those experiencing economic precarity.

As has been alluded to above, the design of digital media, space, and platforms can be disabling for many, “from standardized keyboards to small fonts to flash effects that induce seizures in those with epilepsy” (Ginsberg and Rapp 2013, 62), to technically complex processes that gatekeep those who have never had the chance to become computer literate, to the creation of exclusionary spaces for those whose participation in society is always already considered atypical and their exclusion a foregone conclusion. Disability, ability, and accessibility are relational categories and concepts; as Ginsburg and Rapp note, disability is “always already created as a distinction from cultural ideas of normality, shaped by social conditions that exclude full participation in society by those considered atypical” (2013, 54). As such, accessibility and one’s attunement to access issues, particularly online, reflects a larger “politics of recognition and the need to extend access to include the full range of people who constitute the body politic without requiring the typical others to interpret from them” (Ginsburg and Rapp 2013).

For Elsie and her peers, the digital divide pertained predominantly to technical knowledge and digital literacy. Throughout the pandemic, older adults – and particularly queer elders – were experiencing increased isolation and loneliness as the rest of the world shifted to digital platforms. For many, using devices like tablets, laptops, and smartphones was not an existing part of their lives. This meant that they did not have the existing skill sets to utilize these devices or the digital literacy to navigate social media or other digital information sharing platforms, nor the access to such devices when the pandemic began. Moreover, many older adults who did use limited digital services relied on public services like the Toronto Public Library to provide or loan devices as well as to provide classes or one-to-one assistance when using them.

Organizations like ODLAN sprung up in response to this need to get seniors online during the

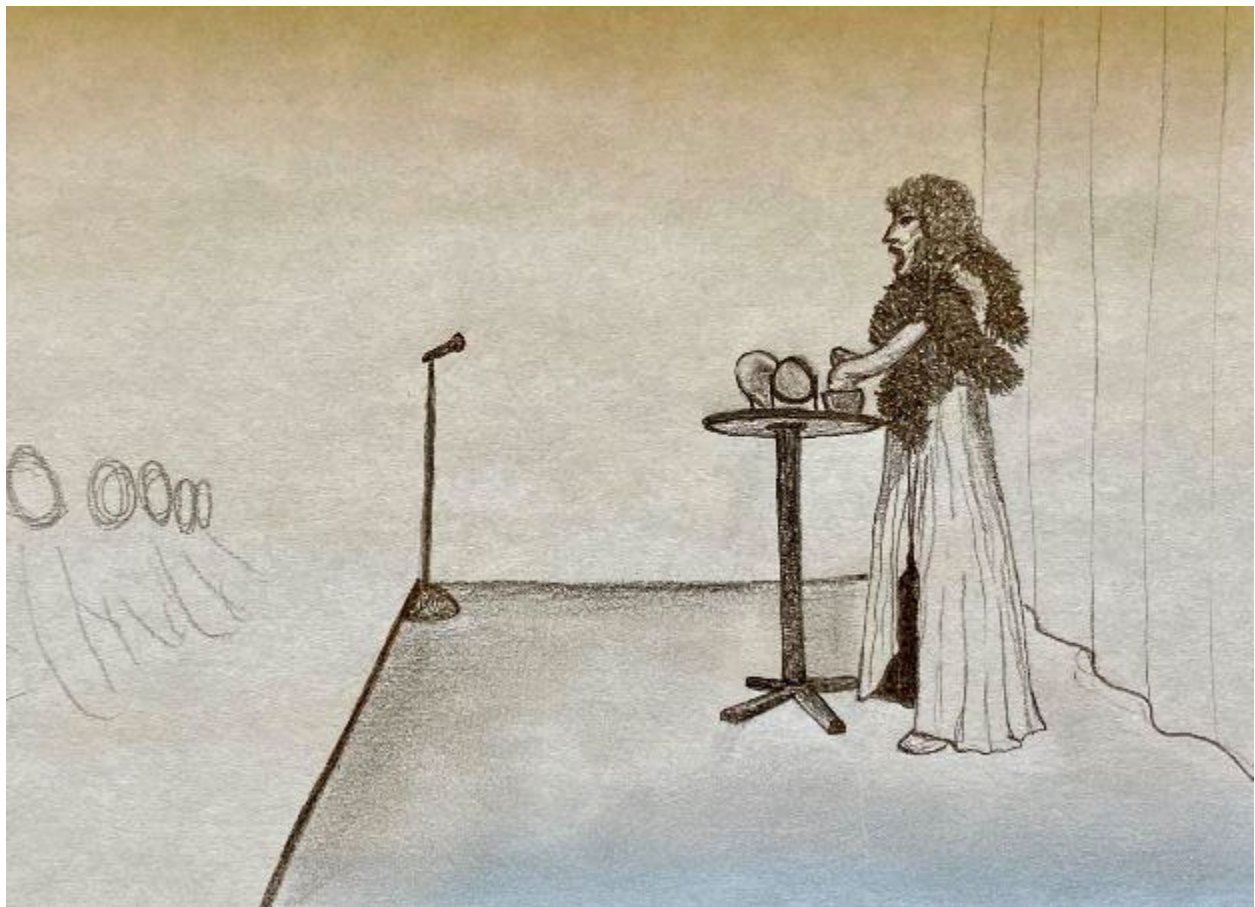
pandemic, attempting to get seniors access to devices, Wi-Fi/data, and other digital necessities they otherwise may not be able to afford.

ODLAN was founded and run by graduate students from York University in response to the lack of initiative established queer organizations and non-profits were taking to address the digital divide for queer elders. In developing access networks, device rental programs, and digital literacy programs for seniors, they realized that “digital inclusion and affirming spaces don’t really exist” as an issue of importance or attention within queer policy and activist circles – instead, the focus is predominantly on how young queer people navigate social media. Moreover, they found a lack of attention to rural queer communities who were experiencing their own digital divide in the sense that rural communities are typically perceived as less affirming spaces for queer people and rural internet or broadband access limits one’s ability to connect to the digital world. As an ODLAN member explained, “all of these concerns just layer on top of each other,” essentially compounding barriers to digital access for queer people of varying backgrounds and demographics.

Elsie – who had self-taught every other element of her long performance career – similarly taught herself how to light her performance corner, hang her green screen, connect devices and edit feeds. She was determined to not be left behind by the younger part of the community, as she had long felt that the community as a whole was not very interested in intergenerational community and that they would not rush to integrate queer elders into digital queer life. She referred to that segment of the community as “those pink eyebrow drag queens” – by this, she was referring to a specific segment of the queer performing arts community, the kind of drag queens who were interested in self-promotion, aesthetics, and their own brand above any sense of belonging to the community. Elsie lamented, “there’s so much ageism in the queer community.

I am always the oldest person any place that I go. I am always the oldest person! And that’s for all kinds of reasons...so I’ve collected a lot of younger friends in the past four years,” she explained, referring to people like Nicholas and Gabriel, “but if we’re going to perform at [venues in the Church-Wellesley Village] – well sometimes at the theatre there are other older people – but for the most part, it is just me and the young folks”. Despite this, Elsie was keen on digital and multimedia possibilities – on multiple occasions, she told me that she dreamed of her next big one-persons how being a multimodal event with “live bums in seats and [livestreaming] all at the same time”.

*Figure 7: A drawing of a recording of Elsie’s in-person one-person show, staged at Buddies in Bad Times Theatre prior to the pandemic.*



This is a sketch of a recording of Elsie’s staged in-person version of their one-person show, which she had staged at Buddies in Bad Times Theatre prior to the pandemic. This version had been purely intended to be viewed by a live in-person audience, before Elsie had begun to engage with multimodal, multimedia, and virtual performance.

## Technical and Material Barriers

Another divide that clearly existed throughout my fieldwork was technical – and this cut across demographic groups. As experiments with digital performance evolved, it became visually and audibly evident that some performers and producers had access to better cameras, microphones, and other equipment, but more to the point, were able to edit and broadcast their source feeds through software resulting in high-quality, professional production value. In the same way that actors would help each other workshop performances and drag artists would give each other tips and feedback pre-pandemic, my interlocutors quickly began sharing tricks and tips of the new digital trade with one another. When a performer would find a new Zoom filter they could use in a live lip-sync, for example, others would immediately type into the chat “how are you doing that?”. Matilda was one such performer who was particularly adept at using these live filters and effects. Matilda’s live performances were characterized by the elaborate mixes of sound effects, changing greenscreen backdrops, live video effects, and bawdy humour. Gabriel and Matilda were always quick to share information in the chat, explaining what functions one would need to enable, what kind of greenscreen they would need and how to set it up, how to position oneself relative to the camera to get the same effect and the like. Likewise, established streamers were quick to help newer performers with moderating their channels and my interlocutors were quick to credit their video editors and to send other performers their way.

But other elements – like layering graphics and logos onto a Twitch stream, switching seamlessly and quickly between camera feeds and angles like a live television show might, or running a banner, chyron, or live captioning – required more technical work and knowledge. Many of these elements were created through the use of Open Broadcast Software (OBS), which Liese and other producers at the Underground taught themselves to use early in the pandemic. As

the quality divide became more apparent and entrenched, Liese began to give one-on-one tutorials in using software and designing graphics, which they then expanded to community workshops and webinars. Liese saw this work as a way to “big up” other performers – for the majority of my interlocutors, the impulse to hoard advantages did not materialize and instead, these knowledge sharing practices were a key part of community-building, making inclusive and accessible spaces, and lifting each other up. That being said, to access this generous network of knowledge, an emerging or aspiring artist would have to already be connected to the community and know where to look. Moreover, this technically advanced knowledge did not and could not help those who were still struggling with the basics of accessing digital platforms at all.

As has been alluded to, financial and material access concerns were also prevalent for digital performers and audiences alike throughout the pandemic. Things like access to a stable high-speed internet or wireless connection; laptops or computers with requisite graphics cards, software, and enough RAM (random-access memory); microphones, cameras and lights; and green screens and other set pieces – in addition to the pre-existing need for costly makeup, hair, and costuming – made staging digital performance a costly endeavour. That is not to discount the expense of in-person performances, but to illustrate that the start-up costs of being a self-employed digital performer quickly added up in a time of increased economic precarity. Recognizing that the costs of digital performance were a major barrier to entry for always already precarious artists, Toronto Pride began an equipment rental program and, when public health restrictions allowed for it, offered bookable free “office space” in their offices for performers to shoot in. Buddies in Bad Times Theatre offered equipment rentals and revamped their emerging artists programs to serve segments of the community that had undoubtedly been most underserved by pandemic responses. While these programs were undoubtedly needed, it is

worth noting that they did not launch until nearly a full-year into the pandemic, as these organizations also did not have equipment and funds on hand and had to organize and apply for grants to support these projects and buy equipment to rent out.

Likewise, adding on additional software and their accompanying skillsets also resulted in either paying for others to edit one's videos or create graphics or taking on the time, labour, and cost of teaching oneself new technical skills. Moreover, a return on these investments was not guaranteed – thousands of dollars of equipment, hundreds to thousands of dollars on costuming and makeup, and days to weeks-worth of labour could go into producing a single pre-recorded video of four to five minutes in length. While digital meant more opportunities to make something and put it out into the world, it came with fewer opportunities for adequate compensation. Gabriel explained this well:

“There are a lot of opportunities to make something and put it out into the world, but not a lot of opportunities to make something, put it out into the world, and be compensated for it. A great example is Matilda and her Twitch streams. That's not something she would've been able to do in a physical space in a bar. No one would've booked it, no one would let her do it. But on Twitch, it's something that works...and it's working for her. But when people want to book like twenty performers and do pre-recorded videos, you'll get maybe \$5 in tips [each]. It's tough to do that and have it be sustainable, especially because digital drag is so much work. A live number isn't that much more work than it would be on a stage, but when I do a pre-recorded number, I do ten takes so I have different shots and angles to edit together. Instead of showing up, doing a number, and going home, I do the same number ten times and then spend a whole day editing a video together. And once you've done that work you can ship that out to a few different shows, but to be compensated fairly for your work is difficult.

I already had a high-quality camera, I already had a high-quality microphone from [past career]; I had the ability to buy a \$1300 laptop, so I had a laptop that was powerful enough to do livestreams. But I did a test run and my laptop just was not powerful enough, so I had to buy this new one. But I was in a position where I could do that, even though I was taking hits financially in my day job. I was still able to do that and not everyone was. I think a lot of people...well we've missed them. Accessibility has increased in a lot of ways because you can watch a drag show on Twitch from your couch and be safe and comfortable in doing that, but the inverse is also true.”

As Gabriel alluded to, much of this digital work was paid for by tips divided between all performers in the show. This was not a lucrative business model. On the other hand, in-person bar bookings – as well as some digital bookings by organizations with a budget, like Toronto Pride – paid a flat rate for showing up and performing, in addition to any tips you were handed during your stage time.

As Etienne’s experience highlighted, the tipping economy began to dry up as the two-weeks of lockdown in March 2020 crept into April and then May. As it became clear that things were not going to “return to normal” anytime soon and as people began to be laid off, fired, and lose contracts and bookings, disposable income dried up with the larger economy. This resulted in those early efforts to support local artists and businesses, to tip performers in shows like Etienne’s Canada-wide drag show, also ran dry. As I have already outlined in preceding chapters, many of my interlocutors found themselves ineligible for the CERB and other government benefits rolled out during the pandemic. Some organizations within the community established emergency funds and other community funds to pay performers and subsidize some of these costs, but these too relied on the ability of others to donate disposable income. All this to say, there was not a significant amount of disposable income circulating in the community in those years, which limited the ability for my interlocutors to invest in their digital craft, as well as their confidence they would ever receive any return on that investment. Likewise, audience members were limited in their ability to financially support artists, even when they would have liked to do so.

### Increased Access through Digital Spacemaking

While the above barriers are important – and while subsequent chapters will outline how the platforms my interlocutors used created new additional barriers – one must acknowledge how

the digital pivot actually increased access for a number of marginalized communities. The digital pivot enabled an entirely new audience to access queer performances and a new group of people to access queer community spaces – namely those who could not or would not be able to access in-person venues. This includes peoples with disabilities, of course, but it also includes people who could not access bars because of their age, sobriety, or lack of disposable income. It also includes those who did not feel safe or able to physically access queer spaces in-person.

At the time of writing, there was only one physically accessible venue in the Church-Wellesley Village. Physically accessible, here, refers to the ability to access the space with a mobility disability, meaning that doors, aisles, and bathrooms are accessible with mobility aids. This does not include other measures of accessibility for other forms of disability, like environmental disabilities or episodic conditions that are triggered by exposure to scented products or certain kinds of lighting. In that sense, there are no truly accessible venues in the Village. Given this, there has always been a segment of the queer community that has been unable to safely attend in-person performances or gatherings in the Village that were now able to access them through digital platforms. This also enabled previously isolated queer people with disabilities to connect with an active and vibrant queer community online who, through these connections, became actively committed to making the Village more accessible when a return to in-person would be possible so that their new friends could join them.

Before the pandemic, the majority of performance spaces or stages in the Village were located in bars. The bars charged covers or ticket prices for entry in addition to steeply priced drinks and food, if food was available at all. On top of these costs, there was an expectation that audience members would tip performers – and that expectation enabled venues to underpay performers. Most digital performances were free or pay-what-you-can to attend, which enabled

more people to participate and to hang around for longer. The latter part is as important as being able to get through the door – being able to spend more time immersed in a queer space enabled more opportunities to interact with other queer people and to build community. The fact that attending no longer meant spending money also meant that some audience members were now able to afford to tip digital performers; while there was certainly not a lot of money circulating in the community at this time, every extra tip made a tangible difference in the quality of life of performers who were struggling financially.

Moreover, decoupling queer life and queer space from bar culture was a major shift. Suddenly, people in recovery or who were otherwise not comfortable being around drinking culture were able to access queer spaces. Likewise, teenagers could now participate in the queer community spaces built around these digital performances, which they otherwise would not have been legally able to enter in the bars. Moving away from centering queer life in the Village also meant that queer people who did not live downtown – particularly those who lived in underserved neighbourhoods that are not well connected to transit – were now able to participate fully in queer community building online. The ability to be geographically dispersed and share the same digital space also meant that queer people living in surrounding suburbs or rural parts of Ontario now had access to community. Likewise, this enabled emerging artists outside of the city to connect with Toronto performers; this sometimes led to artists from small rural towns, other provinces, and other countries being platformed in my interlocutors' ensemble shows. These opportunities simply would not have existed in-person without requiring money and travel.

Moreover, there is the obvious added benefit that people who did not feel safe being in the Village – particularly those who were closeted and afraid to be outed by their presence in

queer spaces – suddenly had options to be part of community that would not otherwise have been available. While being at home with little privacy restricted some closeted people from fully being able to participate in queer digital life, the possibilities that the digital brought for remote participation cannot be discounted. Of course, some privacy and safety concerns exist in online queer spaces – including the potential to be doxed by homophobic and/or transphobic groups – but the ability to access a Zoom show or a livestream on Twitch without being signed in or identifying oneself removed layers of risk of exposure or visibility for some closeted people, enabling them to connect with community in a way that had not felt doing safe before. The following chapter will engage with those digital threats and manifestations of homophobic and transphobic violence, as well as the ways in which my interlocutors tried to protect the spaces they built.

#### A Note on Togetherness

In many ways, the digital pivot facilitated what Borodina terms “intercorporeal togetherness” – that is, it created new social worlds and social habits “or corporeally constituted responsiveness and reciprocity” which characterizes a form of togetherness, which Borodina (2022) theorizes as mediated by the dis/ability divide. This form of togetherness “characterizes a form of bodily engagement whereby participants ... become present and available for one another, commensurable as social participants, thereby cultivating the present and future potentiality of sharing the world on more equitable terms” (Borodina 2022, 487). While Borodina is speaking specifically to disability inclusion initiatives with this conceptualization, it is a useful framework for thinking through the digitally mediated forms of togetherness that, given the circumstances of safeguarding and public health restrictions during the pandemic, were always already mediated by the dis/ability divide, whether consciously or not. The active choice

to do digital drag, for example, rather than to attempt socially distanced outdoor or patio performances between infection waves was an active choice to include and shield disabled and immunocompromised community members, to protect each other's health and wellbeing, and to continue to keep each other connected. That is, it was both an active choice towards prioritizing accessibility and maintaining this communal togetherness. As Boellstorff writes in his ethnography of Second Life, "virtual worlds can be sites of grieving and inequality, but they can also produce new ways of living, including a kind of empathy that recalls the ethnographic project itself" (2008, 249).

### Conclusion

This chapter builds upon chapter three, in which I argued that how my interlocutors crafted community spaces online was deeply shaped by their understandings of care and community responsibilities. While many of my interlocutors actively worked to make more accessible online spaces and to protect those spaces, this chapter explores how the ability to be present and fully participate in digital spaces was inaccessible to some people for a variety of intersecting structural reasons. This chapter outlined the barriers to participation in digital community that my interlocutors and their audiences experienced to varying degrees throughout the pandemic, with a particular focus on the elderly, those living in unsafe situations, and those who were experiencing financial precarity. I put these barriers into conversation with the many ways in which the digital pivot did make queer spaces more accessible for other subsections of the queer community, particularly those with disabilities and those who were unable to be physically present in the Village for a myriad of reasons. This chapter does not argue that digital spaces were inherently good and accessible or bad and inaccessible; rather, it acknowledges that

these contradictions exist and should be held in tension. With this in mind, the following chapters take up the lived experiences of inequality in these new ways of living.

## Chapter 5: Posting Queer Bodies

*“We’re queer! You shadow ban us anyways!”*

On a chilly December evening in 2020, I curled up on my couch with my laptop to watch a digital drag show on Twitch. The familiar face of my interlocutor, Nicholas, was center screen. On this night, Nicholas was dressed in his street clothes but still sporting a fully-coifed tall white wig, imitating French Rococo style. Nicholas was joined by his co-host Dante, who was similarly sporting makeup, a wig and hat, but without a full costume. They started their show quite late that night and were seated together on a couch in front of a brick wall that had been painted white. Nicholas asked Dante how their week had been and Dante replied, “oh, you know, just taking up space”. Canadian actor Elliot Page had publicly come out as transgender days prior and both Nicholas and Dante were excited to talk about it; Nicholas had even done an interview with the CBC about Page, attempting to explain some of the nuances of talking about trans\* people to its readership. As they finished chatting about Page, Dante began to perform a lip sync number as the chat quickly lit up with audience members informing them that they could not hear Dante’s music. Dante and Nicholas were used to this happening – Nicholas scrambled to fix the tech while Dante shrugged it off, restarting their number. After the performance, they welcomed a guest onto their show, a model and performance artist named Silas. Silas was Zooming into the show; their video feed taking up half the screen and Nicholas and Dante’s the other.

As they chatted, Silas began asking questions about what they were allowed to do on Twitch – were there words they should not say? Things they should not discuss or show? Could they swear? Nicholas laughed and began explaining the intricacies of Twitch’s rules to Silas. The Monarchs, Nicholas explained, had just received an email from Twitch threatening to deplatform

or ban their account for violations of Twitch’s terms of service. Silas, Nicholas and Dante exchanged knowing looks before Nicholas laughed and exclaimed “we’re queer! You shadow ban us anyways!” As it was, Twitch had already notified them that their channel would not be promoted. This, too, was met with laughter as Dante and Nicholas began explaining to Silas that they were confident that Twitch had *never* promoted their channel to begin with.

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### Introduction

The exchange in the opening vignette above was the first time I had heard the term “shadow ban” or conversations about how Twitch and other platforms constrained queer artists’ artistic choices, audience sizes, and ability to form stable digital communities. Over the course of the pandemic, my interlocutors began articulating similar concerns about the virtual platforms that mediated pandemic living. These concerns essentially amounted to the following: digital platforms, like Twitch, Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram, were cracking down on so-called “sexual content” and community standards violations in such a way that seemed to disproportionately flag any and all queer and trans\* content as “sexual” and therefore violating community standards. This has resulted in silences and the absence of transgressive queer and trans\* bodies across the digital platforms which kept many of us connected during the pandemic. In this chapter, I take up those digital silences which reverberate throughout the community and this research, asking how digital media platforms shape and/or constrain queer visibility online and how that (in)visibility impacts my interlocutors’ lives.

This chapter begins by unpacking the political context of this phenomenon, locating it within a larger history of attempts to regulate online speech and examining how it manifests in

platform governance structures. I weave together the stories and concerns of several interlocutors here to illustrate how the turn to digital platforms has constrained the ability to make, perform, and share transgressive and/or emancipatory art; invigorated the impetus to self-censor; disrupted digital networks and worldmaking processes; and pushed transgressive queer constituencies out of the digital public sphere.

*Figure 8: A painting of an anonymized Twitch channel from my fieldnotes.*



### Policing Queer Bodies Online

In these initial conversations about visibility and shadowbanning, I felt always just a bit lost, like I had turned on a movie in the middle of the action. I was constantly scribbling down terms that I did not recognize, frantically googling pieces of legislation to read about later, too embarrassed to ask someone to explain when the whole room seemed to be nodding along

knowingly. Over six-months in 2020-2021, I attended an online festival on performance art and QTBIPOC cabaret where these conversations began to clarify and form a larger picture for me. In a series of Zoom panels about various aspects of queer performance and queer cabaret and burlesque, performers and artists, particularly draglesque and burlesque performers, explained the intricacies of being queer and performing in a transgressive body online.

One particular event solidified, in my mind, what the community had been articulating for months. In early 2021, I attended a Zoom panel put on by local artists, including some of my interlocutors, on gender-bending and queer cabaret. The video feeds of the five panelists and moderator were pinned center-screen – the Zoom room’s makeshift stage and dais. One of my interlocutors, Bini, was a panelist, which was what had brought me to the panel. Bini was in drag for the event, their long wispy 301-inspired eyelashes drawing focus to their exaggerated features. After some thirty minutes of discussion of each panelist’s artistic practices, the issue of FOSTA-SESTA and the policing of “sexual content” online was raised and panelists became quite animated as they started describing an impending purge of “inappropriate” content from Instagram and other platforms.

That feeling that I had stumbled into the scene mid-action was warranted; the story of queer performance artists in Toronto that I now found myself chronicling had begun years earlier in the United States. On April 11, 2018, a joint bill called FOSTA-SESTA was signed into law by President Donald J. Trump. The FOSTA-SESSTA package was a joining of the U.S. House bill *Allow States and Victims to Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act* (FOSTA) and the U.S. Senate bill *Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act* (SESTA). The purported goal of FOSTA-SESTA had been to combat online sex trafficking by cracking down on websites that enabled the sex trade, but FOSTA-SESTA was incredibly vague and lacked operational definitions of what constituted

trafficking versus voluntary sex work and seemed more concerned with the policing of decency and morality (Morgan 2020). This legislation served as a revision to the controversial 1996 *Communications Decency Act* (CDA), which had held under Section 230 that online service providers were not to “be treated as the publisher or speaker of any information by another content provider”. For better or worse, Section 230 had served as a legal shield for internet service providers and companies like Facebook and Twitter for over twenty years, meaning that website operators had little to no legal incentive to regulate speech on their platforms. FOSTA-SESTA struck down Section 230, removing that shield and putting service providers on notice that they would be held civilly and criminally responsible for the content users posted to their websites and apps. Moreover, FOSTA-SESTA amended the Mann Act, the existing anti-prostitution and anti-sex trafficking law, to specifically hold online service providers responsible for “sexual content” published on their platforms (Chamberlain 2019). While FOSTA-SESTA is an American law, it applies to any service provider whose offices, equipment, or servers are located in the United States and therefore impacts global digital landscapes.

Since FOSTA became law, the advertisement of sexual services and an increasingly vague swathe of so-called “sexual content” has been effectively criminalized (Mia 2020). The law has been widely critiqued for being overly broad. Despite legislators’ assurances that their focus was targeted, the language of the bill is sweeping and lacks concrete operational definitions of permissible and impermissible online behaviours, lending itself to an insidious kind of mission creep that has subsumed a wide range of artistic expressions into the category of indecency. Effectively, FOSTA-SESTA has resulted in images, expressions, and/or behaviours coded as being related or in proximity to sex work being coded as liabilities and illegalities, leading to a stark chill on digital speech and expression.

The majority of my research participants had been impacted by the far-reaching effects of FOSTA-SESTA. In late 2020, the image-sharing social media platform Instagram began a purge of “sexual content” from their platform, banning images which showed nudity and/or specific gendered body parts (female presenting chests, for example, were banned whereas male presenting chests were not) in addition to words or phrases that may be perceived as double-entendres and many emojis that could convey sexual meanings. This purge was reliant on algorithms and users alike flagging content they perceived to be inappropriate and this had a disproportionately discriminate effect, targeting artistic expressions and queer content that was not intended to be sexual. One of the Zoom panelists, a Draglesque performer, explained the Instagram purge like this:

“they’re doing their big purge of content from emojis of a “sexual nature”...to specific individuals showing their butt...because we know we see so many men continue to show ass who don’t get censored but then we see trans\* folks [do it]...and they get shadow banned or they get blocked or their posts get flagged”.

Another queer performance artist on this panel explained that they felt these policies were a form of prohibition. They explained that, in their view, prohibition is reactionary – queer people online were openly engaging in sharing images, videos, and other content which celebrated queer and trans\* bodies and lives and which showed queer sexualities and ways of being, and there was a reaction to then take that away because there is a larger societal connotation towards the perceived dangers of those behaviours. This prohibitory reaction manifests in a myriad of ways; in some cases, it looks like these “sexual content” purges and bans, like the removal of content and art that once lived online. In other cases, it looks like preventing that content from ever living online at all, or from ever existing in the public sphere.

As the host of this panel, a long-time burlesque performer, lamented, it also resulted in pushing queer artists and queer communities writ large off of these platforms altogether. She

used the example of the fallout that queer artists and sex workers experienced after model and actress Bella Thorne joined OnlyFans. My interlocutors were well-aware of the Bella Thorne controversy; the model and actress had joined the subscription-based social media platform OnlyFans in August 2020. OnlyFans allows content creators to sell digital original content to subscribers, known as fans, and is infamous for allowing the selling of sexually-explicit content. While not all creators on OnlyFans are sex workers, OnlyFans is one of the only stable and mainstream platforms that allows and enables sex work and sexually explicit content. In Thorne's first day on the platform, she made over \$1 million USD in subscriptions. Thorne began selling access to pay-per-view nude photographs to her subscribers but did not actually provide those photos, which prompted her subscribers to request refunds at such an astounding rate that OnlyFans completely revised their payment structure and disbursement model. Within days, Thorne's co-option of this platform that had been used successfully and safely by sex workers prior to these events resulted in the company placing maximum limits on what creators could charge fans and lengthy delays to payment disbursements. While this had little to no material impact on Thorne herself, it drastically changed the lives of many online sex workers who were always-already marginalized.

Speaking about this, the moderator said:

“When COVID happened, there was this interesting relationship between celebrities taking up space on OnlyFans and sex workers being shut down online. It's incredibly problematic for the folks that were already on Only Fans but don't have the kind of following that celebrities have, and it isn't the celebrities that [end up being] shadowbanned for showing body parts. It is the most marginalized communities [who pay the price]...how as performers do we navigate that kind of relationship when the industry is being hijacked by celebrities or being mainstreamed literally at the cost of being able to do the work that you do? I know that for a while, the cabaret community moved to Twitch, but then Twitch started banning shows, so they moved to other platforms that aren't as stable and then got banned or had to move their shows to avoid being shut down as well. It becomes this huge task just to find a virtual space to do the

work that you've been doing for *years* in various different spaces. I also find there tends to be a season for this kind of work where, as we get closer to Pride, you know, people loosen up about their regulations and what is deemed viable and legitimate or not. And then as soon as we move away from Pride it all gets locked down again...cabaret is magical because you have autonomy over the business of your body and the business of your performing whereas now there's a strange appropriation that's happening from outside the community and it's taking away from folks in the community and preventing us from giving back to and sharing with the community.”

*Figure 9: A painted reflection on this panel.*



This piece – another multimedia collage – combines a painting of a panelist performing a lyrical dance number. During this panel, she shared this performance video with the audience, before explaining that because her costume consisted of a bra, panty, and draped fabric – and likely because she was a trans woman dressed in this way – the video had been flagged as sexual content and removed from Instagram. The moderator’s words are pasted around and across her body, reading: “Cabaret is magical because you have autonomy over the business of your body and the business of your performing”. Her face is obscured by an Instagram notification which reads “Story removed for nudity or sexual activity”. I made this several days after attending this panel as I reflected on the implications of what they were describing.

In a Zoom interview in January 2022, Georgia, a burlesque and drag performer, told me that it now felt impossible to do cabaret, burlesque, drag, and other forms of performance art that may be considered risqué in public spaces. They explained that the only place they had been able to perform without being shutdown was Zoom, but that the creation of new Zoom links and sharing of passwords limited who could join the audience. Twitch and Instagram, they explained, allowed audience members to follow or subscribe to specific artists; these platforms kept lines of

communication open between audience and performer and provided stable digital spaces in which performers could be found and contacted. “It’s easy to build a long-term audience or even to build an interactive community on Twitch”, they told me, “You can’t do that in the same way on Zoom. Zoom isn’t built for that”. Their options to share their art and to reach an audience were constrained in ways that were specific to online spaces and it had made them weary of digital performance. They told me, “There’s value to [digital performance]...I can reach people who don’t live in the city or who can’t safely access an in-person venue...but I’m just so tired of it. This situation isn’t good for me”.

This echoes how Bini felt about being pushed off public platforms. In that panel about gender-bending and queer cabaret, as well as in our interviews and conversations over the course of my fieldwork, Bini would get visibly upset talking about the ramifications of anti-queer and anti-sex worker regulations. Looking quite exasperated with the state of affairs, they said on that panel:

“I am infuriated that the avenues that we are given are always already corporatized and about monetizing and already set up with algorithms that have migrated over from other platforms...seeing the spaces that we have historically been able to at least moderately express ourselves in or at least advertise that we will be expressing ourselves in, be tightened with more draconian and hilarious regulations like banning emojis. *Emojis!*”

Bini threw their arms up in the air in exasperation on that last word, “Emojis!”, emphasizing the frustration and absurdity of the situation. That absurdity and frustration was something Bini brought up consistently with me – for which I cannot blame them. But it was almost always accompanied by some glimmer of hope and some recognition that the work they did, the art they made, was all the more meaningful. Queer cabaret and drag spaces, Bini would tell me, were spaces in which they could exist “without relation to straightness or the cishet male gaze. Where I don’t exist in opposition to those things; I just exist”.

The phenomenon that these artists identified, namely that the digital regulation of sex work and nudity has been collapsed into the policing of transgressive queerness, is not new. In observing this phenomenon play out on the microblogging site Tumblr, Carolyn Bronstein (2020) argued that Tumblr's 2018 purge of so-called "adult content" disproportionately impacted the queer communities and networks that had formed there. Tumblr is a popular microblogging platform on which users can share text, images, videos and other media to their own personal blog pages and "follow" the blogs of other users whose posts will then appear in one's feed. In December 2018, Tumblr announced its adult content ban targeting images of "real-life human genitals or female-presenting nipples, and any content – including photos, videos, GIFs, and illustrations – that depict sex acts" (D'Onofrio 2018). When the ban came into effect, explicit content was flagged and deleted by algorithms designed to identify this content specifically. In practice, however, non-pornographic content was routinely flagged by other users or identified by algorithms that were not able to make fine distinctions between permissible and "sexual" content. Posts including information about or photographs of gender-transition or images of same-sex couples hugging or kissing were often flagged as "adult content", despite not falling under the official terms of the ban (Bronstein 2020). This meant that every individual case in which concerns were raised needed to be reviewed by Tumblr staffers, who were likewise inconsistent in their applications of the policy. The adult content ban swiftly created a hostile environment for queer bloggers and forced many queer communities off the platform altogether, effectively erasing lives and bodies and decimating digital communities and networks.

This policing of threatening sexualities is not new; responding to similar issues in the second wave feminist movement, Audre Lorde (2007) argued that what we perceive to be "sexual" gets broken into two oppositional categories: the erotic and the pornographic. Lorde

held that the erotic is a form of self-actualization and power, a source of women and queer people's power specifically, which is purposefully misrecognized and misnamed as pornographic and wrong so as to render feminine and queer bodies disempowered. Misrecognition is key here. As Ahmed (2013) argues, our own subjectivities are formed through recognizing others as different from ourselves; we recognize who we are through recognizing who we are not. This oppositional framework often has moralizing connotations; in this case, the white liberal imaginary constructs itself in opposition to the unsanitized transgressive queer and must therefore purposefully misrecognize politicized queer bodies as indecent and apart from themselves. The effect that Bronstein (2020) describes, then, does not only apply to sex workers, but also to those perceived or coded as being in relation to sexual indecency like queer and trans\* artists and performers. While there are, of course, queer sex workers, the conflation of these two constituencies reflects a larger moralizing cultural association of queerness with sexual indecency.

This association by cis/heteronormative society of politicized queer bodies with sex work and indecency harkens to homophobic representations of queerness as deviancy, immorality, and perversion. Demarcating between politicized and depoliticized queerness is crucial here; over the past two decades, homonormative queer bodies, or those which are race-, class-, and gender-sanitized, have been selectively incorporated into capitalist and nationalist formations through a liberal politics of recognition predicated on the disavowal of politicized, unsanitized "bad queers" (Puar 2007; Rao 2015). This period in digital space has been characterized by the collapsing of transgressive, politicized, and unsanitized queer bodies into categories of indecency, and this is inseparable from increasingly violent anti-trans\* and anti-queer politics offline which have served to further police and regulate queer bodies. In 2020, other social media

platforms began similar purges of “sexual content” from their platforms. Relying on co-moderation systems which combine algorithms and user-flagged content, these purges have disproportionately flagged and removed queer content and queer art from digital platforms. The effect of this prohibitory reaction to queer visibility online has been that people who are visibly queer or trans\*, particularly racialized queer and trans\* people, are discriminately targeted and effectively erased from or forced off these platforms. For racialized queer and trans\* people, this experience was compounded by the ways in which manifestations of anti-queer hate and racism intersect online and the ways that racialized bodies are viewed – particularly through the lens of misogynoir – as inherently hypersexual.

Within the context of the pandemic and the pivot to digital worlds, this collapsing of transgressive queerness into categories of indecency has both reified increasingly violent anti-trans\* politics offline and has served to strategically police certain bodies out of digital existence. Bini and their co-panelists were intimately attuned to the targeted nature of this content policing. As one panelist, a Latinx draglesque performer, noted, “we have to understand the roots of these laws as targeted violence to eradicate certain populations like sex workers, queer people, Black and Indigenous voices. The selective ways in which certain bodies are censored is targeted and strategic”.

### Prohibit, Moderate, and Control

There is an observable disconnect between social media, media sharing, and livestreaming platforms’ governance rules and the application or enforcement of those rules. The rules appear to be always in a state of flux, applied unevenly and often retroactively, and enforced by a combination of shifting formal policies and the selective usage of technological governance mechanisms. Duguay, Burgess, and Suzor (2018) refer to this as “patchwork

platform governance”. As digital media and social media platforms have become increasingly concerned with promoting profitable forms of digital interaction, there has been a shift towards “lean” governance structures which rely heavily on co-moderation, user community policing, and self-censorship (Duguay, Burgess, and Suzor 2018; Van Dijck 2013). The lack of effective and clear governance measures contributes to a digital culture of harassment, discrimination, and censorship of marginalized users. Instagram, for example, is co-moderated through a cooperative flagging and review system in which individual users can flag and report content they believe to violate community standards. Repeated flags on the same content or account may lead to the account being suspended or to a review by platform staff who must then interpret and apply the community standards policy as they understand it. Likewise, the repeated flagging of content posted under particular hashtags can lead platforms to censor those hashtags in their entirety so that searches for them return few to no results.

Co-moderation is increasingly common online but disproportionately results in targeted flagging of marginalized users’ posts and content. This is something that my interlocutors – and indeed, other scholars of queer and feminist studies – argues disproportionately affects queer people. My interlocutors attributed this to dominant discourses of heteronormativity, homophobia, transphobia, racism, and the rise of extreme right-wing politics. It is important to contextualize here; these virtual queer communities popped up and appropriated space on existing platforms that are designed to serve predominantly cis/heterosexual constituencies. Algorithms and other users alike may misinterpret the culturally-specific aesthetics, aims, and intents of queer art, photos, and videos as sexual or inappropriate. Moreover, the users who flag and report queer content may be motivated to do so because the content in question targets or offends their own personal norms, which may indeed be overtly or covertly sexist, racist,

transphobic, or homophobic. In essence, my interlocutors were experiencing and trying to articulate the following: that while the platforms they are using may have formal rules defining acceptable or unacceptable content and behaviours in their Terms of Service or Community Standards agreements, they also have the discretionary power to enforce and practice these policies irregularly, opaquely, and without any real accountability. While digital platforms and online communities are an increasingly crucial part of queer worldmaking and community building, digital technologies have also enabled the increased surveillance, policing, and control of non-normative sexual representations.

Over the course of my fieldwork, I heard a number of artists speak to the impacts that these shifting standards and forms of censorship, regulation or moderation. Two particular quotes capture those impacts well. The first was shared by a draglesque performer on that panel with Bini:

“When it comes to transferring [their work] to social media, something that is important for people to remember is that with the ways these laws are targeting sex workers, that leads into all sorts of different industries. I think understanding the ways that nudity laws and whatnot affect burlesque performers means that we need to also remember that there is a hierarchy that society has deemed between fine art and what we do. But that we also contribute to this hierarchy within cabaret spaces by saying ‘oh that’s burlesque, so it’s art and not sex work’. We have to remember our history and where burlesque stems from. We have to fight for the rights of sex workers and remember that the reason we are able to function the way that we do in our industry and are able to challenge norms in a way that uplifts the reason we exist comes from the wins sex workers have fought for in the past. And now, we have to fight for all of us, because the ability to work online is being lost by a major part of our community, whether we are sex workers or artists”.

The second comes from a drag and burlesque performer and was shared in a community conversation weeks later:

“When we talk about the impact of selective online censorship, there is an immediate financial impact on the most marginalized members of our communities, especially when we’re talking about sex work within this context. For me, as a draglesque and drag performer, my Insta[gram] being shut down has immediate financial repercussion for

myself, but I also have other avenues and other platforms for my work literally because of the fact that I am not a sex worker and do not share the stigma that comes with that work...I think that what we're experiencing is censorship. This idea of taking marginalized people's worlds and works is nothing new; it's incredible old and it has just been adapted again."

Among the terms that my interlocutors used to describe FOSTA-SESTA were "censorship", "prohibition", and "annexation". Censorship is a particularly appealing term, in part because it evokes histories of state-sanctioned censorship of queer publications and expressions. Censorship "constitutes [a] site of public contestation over legitimate and illegitimate speech" (Cossman 2007, 49), that is, it operates both a repressive power that dictates that which we cannot do or say, but it also works as a productive power in creating space for its own contestation. It is formative in that it produces the boundaries of legitimate speech and it does so performatively; in order to tell us that which we must not say or create, the censor must first utter those words and images that should not be uttered or made (Butler 1997). To tell us what we cannot say, censorship introduces censored speech into the public discourse and in so doing, establishes a site to resist or contest it.

In the Canadian context, battles over the censorship of queer literature, media, and goods are relatively fresh in our collective memory. Canadian state censorship had (and retains) many arms, most notably in customs and criminal law (Cossman 2013). Historically, the Canadian government has employed customs laws to censor the importation of "immoral and indecent materials" and criminal laws to censor the domestic production and distribution of such materials. In 1985, constitutional challenges to existing customs laws forced the government to change "immoral and indecent" to "obscenity", which was defined in Memorandum D9-1-1 as the depiction or description of sexual acts that degraded or dehumanized the participants, including anal sex (Cossman 2013). Criminal and customs laws were also deployed against gay

and lesbian publications and stores, like the Body Politic magazine and Glad Day Bookshop, both of which were at the center of many court challenges. While the legal results of these cases were mixed, this saga served as a site of discursive contestation over legitimate sexuality and sexual representations in which the boundaries for some representations of queer sexuality were shifted. The moral and discursive battles around some representations of queerness were over in the early 2000s, as public opinion in Canada firmly swayed to the side of legalizing same-sex marriage and sanitized queer folks found themselves distanced from obscenity and on the side of legitimized sexuality. The legal and discursive gains of Canadian censorship battles notwithstanding, “community standards” remain and continue to govern expressions of queer life in the public sphere, though the definition of community standards has certainly shifted to be more nebulous, shifting, and perhaps purposefully over-complicated.

Traditionally, censorship refers to a more centralized, bureaucratic and top-down constraining of speech by the state. Even if we reformulate this definition to include corporations, this formulation does not account for the nuanced ways that power and agency operate in co-moderation. Co-moderation has meant that attacks on queer visibility come not just from the algorithm, but also from individual users who are imposing their own interpretations of the rules. The term censorship does, however, effectively capture how the policing of online speech produces the boundaries of il/legitimate speech and in/decency. The act of deciding that a performance or art piece is indecent and flagging it accordingly is an act of (re)producing those boundaries. The term prohibition, though, captures the reactionary element of FOSTA-SESTA, transphobic, and racist politics. My interlocutors spoke about prohibition as being inherently reactionary, as something that occurs because mainstream or heteronormative society has made a moral judgment about certain behaviours and expressions and is now reacting to take those ills

away. That reactionary element is crucial to understanding the role individual users play in co-moderation; we cannot separate the uptick in targeted harassment of queer, trans\*, Indigenous, and racialized peoples online from the reactionary political backlash to the trans\* rights movement, Black Lives Matter, Land Back, and other civil rights movements that gained significant momentum and online support in 2020/21. The reactionary vitriol against these movements have coalesced in the Canadian political landscape, meaning that people and communities sitting at the intersections of racism, transphobia, homophobia, and other systemic forms of discrimination have been disproportionately targeted, vilified, and harassed. One example of this intersection of reactionary politics is the so-called anti-vaccine mandate protests across Canada in early 2022 that saw a coalescing of white supremacist, racist, antisemitic, conspiracist, homophobic, and transphobic protestors on Parliament Hill that centered both swastikas and anti-“gender ideology” signs in their anti-government sentiments.

One performance artist in that cabaret festival used the term “annexation” in explaining how they understood the impact of these content bans; annexing here referring to pieces of QTBIPOC spaces being slowly expropriated and taken away. They said:

“I’ve been thinking about prohibition lately in relation to what’s happened at Instagram...everyone is engaging in this behaviour and there’s a larger societal connotation towards the perceived dangers of that behaviour. So there’s then a reaction to take it away...but it will just migrate into different spaces, like underground cabaret and underground QTBIPOC spaces – not to say that this is a preferable scenario, it’s not. It’s harder to get seen and get into spaces that you’ll be interested in...hopefully the error of these ways will be seen, sooner than the twelve years it took to end actual prohibition. It’s not even just this annexation of sex work and sex positive work, but you’re going to ban the emoji of a peach? It can be sexual, sure, but it’s also a *peach*.”

The impact of this policing of transgressive queerness is an annexation of sex work, sex-positive work, body-positive work, and other iterations of queer self-love and self-celebration. Moreover, it is an annexation of accessibility and stability for virtual queer communities – materially,

financially, psychologically, emotionally and otherwise. The overwhelming effect has been that queer artists and performers are discriminately targeted by this policing and forced to migrate to other spaces, creating underground or pop-up performance and community spaces. Ultimately, this constant digital displacement makes it difficult to find people, to build community, or to even get into the spaces you want to be part of – it creates a chaos and a constant reshuffling in which people and networks can suddenly disappear and the ways in which you knew to find them can vanish overnight. Being shut down and forced to pop-up elsewhere disrupts income streams and mutual aid networks, freezes PayPal accounts and refunds subscription fees and tips on platforms like Twitch, and dissolves carefully crafted networks of audiences and artists. Even for web services not based in or hosted by servers or cloud services located in the United States, FOSTA-SESTA has triggered a transnational chill on digital expression, leading to pre-emptive self-censorship and fear of the nebulous reach of foreign police (Tichenor 2020).

### Posting Trans(gressive) Bodies

Nicholas shared similar experiences he had with this hostile digital environment that he attributed to these bans. At the time of this work, Nicholas was in the middle of medically transitioning and had just recovered from a gender-affirming chest reconstruction surgery (commonly known as top surgery) when we spoke about shadowbanning. With a knowing look on his face, he asked me if I followed him on Instagram and if I had seen his before and after surgery photos. I frowned – I had seen a recent photo of healed male-presenting chest, but the pre- and post-operative photos had never crossed my feed. Nicholas was unsurprised by my answer. He explained to me that his posts about the surgery and photos of his body and scars were routinely hidden from view by Instagram. This “hiding” of content by the host platform is often referred to as “shadow banning”, meaning that one’s account has not been banned outright,

but that their posts, streams, or content would not appear on the feeds of others or be promoted by the platforms' algorithm. It is essentially a partial blocking of some or all of a user's content from appearing in specific areas of an online platform or community. Because it is not a formal ban, users do not receive any notice from a platform this is happening. Rather, their content is deprioritized, not promoted, or hidden by the platform's algorithms to limit the reach of their posts. The existence of shadow banning is quite controversial, with Instagram and other platforms claiming that they do not have shadow banning policies and do not engage in this practice. Nonetheless, it is widely believed and accepted that queer content is routinely identified and deprioritized by the algorithms that govern Instagram, Twitter, Twitch, and other platforms. It was commonplace across virtual community spaces to hear and read comments like "wow I didn't know they showed trans\* content" or "I'm sure no one will be able to see this".

Nicholas was quite upset about the pictures of his chest being taken down. When I asked him about the flagging of "sexual content" on his accounts, he said:

"fuck Instagram, fuck Twitch. It's just dumb, it's just stupid. It pisses me off. The fact that my photo got taken down two weeks before I posted the next one...it's bullshit. And we all know *why* my chest was inappropriate one week and not the next."

While our conversation kept coming back to Instagram posts, this was not a problem unique to Instagram. As the opening ethnographic moment of this chapter illustrated, being shadow banned, having artwork or livestreams taken down, or accounts outright banned and removed transcended any particular platform or parent company. It seemed to happen on any platform where my interlocutors could connect with a public audience. And it wasn't just imagery of trans\* or otherwise transgressive bodies that resulted in being flagged, reported, or banned – innocuous videos of drag and gender performers lip syncing, of a performer dancing in a

bodysuit, or livestreams in which you could see an artist's feet<sup>10</sup> were just as likely to be reported or automatically flagged.

*Figure 10: A painting of Nicholas.*



I painted this image of Nicholas after this conversation about shadow banning. Nicholas is depicted in drag against a blue and pink background meant to invoke the trans pride flag. The words “Sorry, unless you’ve got a time machine, this content is unavailable” are pasted across the left side next to his face. This message comes

from Twitch and was a standard error message one would receive when a video recording, livestream, or channel page was no longer available. I received this message myself many times over the course of my fieldwork when my interlocutors’ channels would be taken down. His face is obscured by the most common notifications he would receive from Twitch and Instagram – the Instagram “Your post goes against our community guidelines” notification being most prominent as this is the notification he received for posting the photo of his post-operative chest. Nicholas is in drag in this photo; I have over-stylized his makeup, wig, and appearance, keeping the spirit of his signature looks while changing them so as to render him less identifiable.

This conversation impacted me in very profound ways and necessitated creating a piece of art. Early in my fieldwork as I began grappling with these issues of visibility and shadow banning, I had not yet fully internalized the implications of erasure. I could see, at this stage, how some of these performances in which artists were in various states of undress could be easily mistaken as sexual. It was not a foregone conclusion to me that this was an intentional or targeted action being taken against specific communities – I still held that many of these incidents were simply mistakes. In retrospect, I attribute that hesitancy, that idea that it was not unreasonable to overreact to sexuality, as a manifestation of internalized misogyny that haunts many people who are raised and socialized as girls and women within patriarchal power structures.

The story Nicholas tells about his post-operative masculine chest photo removed any room for ambiguity for me. To me, that was blatantly an attempt to remove an image of a trans person’s body from the platform simply because they committed the sin of having a body that made cis-heteronormative people uncomfortable. A common

<sup>10</sup> Twitch, in particular, associates images of feet with sexual fetish and has targeted these images for removal. Some of my interlocutors find this particularly amusing and joke about it, while others find it symptomatic of the larger problem.

commitment from platforms like Tumblr and Instagram when they began their crackdowns on sexual content was that posts containing information about or images of gender-affirming care would not be categorized as adult content and would be protected. And yet, as I came to find out, Nicholas was not an outlier and this was not a bug – it was a feature of the system. As a non-binary person who came out during this project, this was the first time that the gravity of erasure really sunk in for me – the potential implications of our erasure from mainstream visual culture felt materially real in this moment.

In January 2021, I was hanging out on Zoom with Etienne, a racialized queer poet, artist, and producer. He began asking me questions about my research and he began talking in earnest about the struggle to create queer community and networks in a time when access to digital space is both essential and constrained for queer artists. This was especially of concern, he noted, for people who had not been very present in online spaces prior to the pandemic or who did not have a large following or audience built up on social media. Etienne had himself had his Instagram account reported by trolls as part of a targeted harassment campaign during the pandemic as he promoted a Canada-wide online drag show, so he was deeply aware of how losing that platform impacted artists. Etienne explained:

“It’s almost trickier now because we’re inclined to pick who we invite to be in a show based on their online following. When you build a show, it almost becomes part of the criteria like ‘I want this person to do a video because they have the most followers’. Our sponsors will say ‘we want this person to promote our product because they have more followers’ and it becomes part of the game. And I feel like I have to play the game, because I don’t have a choice if I want sponsors to pay the artists, but it is another form of discrimination against marginalized people. What is this person just lost their account because trolls attacked them? They did it to me! I got all of these homophobic attacks for promoting activist accounts and our drag shows and I lost it all.”

Even for those performers who had a pre-established online presence or were already part of online communities or sub-communities, there was still this ever-present threat hanging in the air that at any time they could lose their accounts and platforms. At any time, they could be reported to Instagram or Twitch for posting “inappropriate content” or violating community standards, whether this was true or not. At any time, any user who took issue with them, their politics, their queerness or transness, could destroy their livelihood with a tap or click. The

processes for appealing such reports or bans were arduous and often unsuccessful, and the threat of new reports always loomed. Speaking about the chilling effect of this virtual policing of queerness and propriety, a Black trans\* burlesque performer noted that:

“We are taught to believe that only certain people are allowed to speak and be listened to...women are not those people. Gender non-conforming folks, trans\* folks, Indigenous peoples...those are not the people we are told should be heard or listened to or cared for.”

One effect of the invisibility of transgressive queer bodies online is what Bobby Noble (2013) calls corporeal incoherence. Noble’s (2013) work on trans\* pornography suggests that existing in a world where images of trans\* pleasure are invisible means that trans\* people have no reassuring visual evidence of the possibility of living well and living sexually in a trans\* body. This concept can be extended beyond images of sexual pleasure and pornography; a lack of images of trans\*, gender non-conforming, genderqueer, and otherwise transgressive queer bodies living well – or even just existing at all – means a lack of evidence of, information about, and visual reassurance that it is possible to live in transgressive bodies that do not fit neatly into gendered boxes and sexual binaries. The stories we tell and the images that we see and show – or those which we do not see and do not show – are incredibly important. One of my interlocutors, Fran, emphasized this point when we talked about her storytelling choices. Before the pandemic, Fran’s bread and butter, so to speak, were comedic performances that catered to audiences of middle to upper-class white gay men and straight women with disposable income that were seeking out drag, but not a politicized drag. Nonetheless, Fran understands drag and her performance practices as inherently political acts caught up in a delicate balance between escapist entertainment and using her platform effectively. She was particularly concerned, when we spoke, about the storytelling choices her fellow performers make and the far-reaching effects that a lack of visibility may have on the always already most marginalized members of the queer

community. In a Zoom interview in November 2020, Fran told me “I think when we center stories about cis white straight men, or even cis white gay men like me, their stories keep on being told and they eventually get to dictate who else’s stories get told...we’re used to only seeing [certain] ideas of what [queer] stories are and that’s limiting”.

Nicholas’s concerns about his Instagram posts and Fran’s larger concerns about whose stories get told both come back to the same central issue of queer visibility and representation. At the core of these conversations was a genuine concern that these policies were resulting in preemptive self-censorship on the one hand – that is, a limiting of artistic and storytelling choices to make art that will not be flagged as inappropriate or impermissible content – and, on the other, a systematic removal of queer art that would not self-censor. Digital queer communities or counterpublics – as they exist in a time of pandemic and isolation – are mediated through mediums that are often harnessed and wielded by state and commercial interests as technologies of control. Subaltern or marginalized groups have long turned to film, video, and other forms of “small media” to pursue political aims through representational politics as well as to pursue emancipatory projects (Marcus 1995).<sup>11</sup> Nonetheless, even small media comes to be concentrated in the hands of the state or culture industry professionals who tend to share the dominant codes of the state (Hall 1999) – in this case, queer digital media comes to be popularly disseminated through a handful of platforms that share these dominant values and codes. Censorship and anticipatory self-censorship in the proliferation of “small media” like digital media, livestreaming, and video sharing platforms is therefore not an uncommon phenomenon.

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<sup>11</sup> This is not to say that *all* artists approach their creative practices as an intentionally or consciously political project. Many do so simply because the work brings them joy and many may not describe or understand their projects as political or as an intervention in any way. The community of artists with whom I worked had been engaging in conversations about the politics of their art – and anti-oppression community education initiatives run through key venues and artistic institutions – for years before this research, which has ultimately informed their own perceptions of their work.

Ultimately, this environment has created a chill on how queer artists can express themselves on public-facing platforms and this has resulted in the absence of imagery and representations of queer bodies living well, or queer joy, of queer celebration, and of queer excellence.

I argue that this environment has also (re)produce specific imagery and narratives of queerness that are central to the white liberal imaginary, in which the personhood of marginalized groups is “coterminous with injury” (Hartman 1997) and in which marginalized communities are invited to speak only to and of their pain in trauma-centered or damage-centered narratives (Sedgwick 1990; Tuck and Yang 2014). By this, I mean that the stories about queerness that remain permissible are those which in which queer people speak to their trauma – Transgender Day of Remembrance (TDOR) shows, for example, in which artists are invited to performance identity-based pieces about the difficulty of their lives – while the art that becomes impermissible is that which celebrates queer existence and resistance, queer love and sexuality, body and sex positivity, queer joy, queer celebration, queer excellence, and politicized unsanitized queerness. I take up these larger conversations about trauma, resistance, and the politics of visibility and storytelling in the chapters that follow.

#### A Note on Safety and Public/Private Spaces

As the pandemic stretched on and Twitch, Instagram, and Facebook increasingly cracked down on “inappropriate content”, my interlocutors began switching tactics. As it became more and more difficult to successfully take up space on public platforms, a potentially contradictory position to taking up space as revolutionary praxis began emerging: a noticeable shift of some performance practices and aspects of community-building to private spaces. The producers at The Underground – the Twitch channel that found itself so often on the defensive and having to shut down, relocate, and rebuild – began turning to private spaces like Discord in late 2021 to

build community on less disruptable platforms. Their Twitch channel is still the primary performance space, but the Discord server exists to keep everyone connected and able to talk privately and without censor. It also enables the sharing of private Zoom events with their audience. This migrating into private digital spaces is a digital equivalent to queer artists migrating to “underground cabaret or underground QTBIPOC spaces”. You have to *know* the Discord exists and get invited to join it in order to maintain these community connections. It becomes harder for performers who do not know these producers to be seen and booked and it becomes harder for queer community members writ large to access these spaces. But, for the producers of The Underground, it is the only viable way to maintain their community – when their Twitch channel gets shut down now, they can immediately communicate with their audience about how to find them. They can pre-emptively decide to move a show to a private Zoom call when they know the performance will likely trigger the Twitch algorithm or be flagged as “inappropriate”. It is a tricky position: in order to avoid self-censorship and to preempt having their digital home – the beacon their audience knows to find – pulled out from under them, producers and performers are taking their work and their communities out of the public sphere. This digital turn to queer underground spaces is not driven by a desire to hide transgressive queer art, but rather is a response to being pushed out of the digital public sphere by prohibitory reactionary politics and structures.

These moves away from public space and into private spaces, like Discord servers, was a relatively new development when I was finishing fieldwork. It was something my interlocutors had mused about doing as an emancipatory project throughout 2020 and early 2021, but now it seemed to be happening as a survival mechanism. I cannot say anything conclusive about this shift; in theory it may solve some of these concerns of censorship on public platforms while

mounting problems of its own. While this could stabilize community connections by removing the possibility that accounts will vanish at a moment's notice, it also makes it harder for new people to find these queer communities. This produces a kind of exclusion – having to already know about a space in order to find it might protect that space from trolls and targeted harassment, but it also keeps out newcomers. The Monarchs and the Underground both tried to work around this by reminding their audiences on Twitch that they had a private Discord where some shows, after-shows, and community events took place and instructing their audiences to direct message them for the link. There is an assumption underlying these instructions that their audience members understand how these platforms work, that they already know how to contact these producers and performers privately to get access to Discord, that they even know what Discord is and how it is used, and that they have the technological skills, equipment, and internet speed and bandwidth to interface with multiple platforms simultaneously. But for many, audience members and other performers alike, this is not always the case.

My initial response to the shift to private space was that this was a turn to the digital closet. Like Sedgwick, I understand the closet to be a performance “initiated ... by the speech act of a silence” (1990, 3). The queer closet comes from the dominant societal understanding that sexuality is not a matter of public concern, that it ought to be relegated to the private sphere. When sexuality is relegated to the private sphere, however, power, laws, and social order become organized around what Sedgwick calls the privilege of unknowing. By this, I mean that when we remove sexuality to the private sphere, there is no space to talk about sexuality in the public sphere and cis-hetero society gets to claim ignorance to the lives of queer people. Our needs need not and should not be addressed publicly because they are private, and because they are private, everyone else need not know. The closet – that silence or absence of queerness – is a feature in

both the lives of queer people *and* cis-heteronormative society. That dominant society need not see transgressive queerness, that privilege of unknowing, shapes their lives as well as ours. This has a compounding effect – when we leave the closet and bring queerness into the public sphere, we become unruly, dangerous, and frightening. A contemporary example of this phenomenon is the reactionary anti-trans\* movement – when trans\* people and activists bring their identities into public view, dominant society sees them as dangerous and reacts quickly to force them back into the closet where their transgressions need not be seen or heard.

Sedgwick (1990) tell us that queer sexual passion is always perceived to be dangerous – in the intervening decades since she wrote that, the goal posts around queer sexual passion have shifted in some respects. Nonetheless, queer people who do not conform to homonormativity continue to be perceived as:

“dangerous enough that women and men who find or fear they are homosexual, or are perceived by others to be so, are physically and mentally terrorized through the institutions of law, religion, psychotherapy, mass culture, medicine, the military, commerce and bureaucracy, and brute violence” (1990, 58).

The closet remains a fundamental feature of queer social life – as Sedgwick notes, even those of us who are openly queer will withhold that information from some people when strategically necessary. Even for those of us who are fortunate enough to be supported in being out, the strategic silences of the closet remain a shaping presence. My friend Alice once said, as we discussed the ways in which we weave in and out of the closet on a daily basis to protect ourselves, “just because your closet has amenities doesn’t mean you aren’t in one”. What Alice is capturing here is that the act of moving some or all aspects of queer community and queer art into private spaces is, in and of itself, a form of closeting. It creates silences and absences; even though it does so strategically and voluntarily, its end effect is similar to those silences created by discriminatory platform governance and the fall-out of FOSTA-SESTA. But to interface with the

closet is not a moral failing – as I have already said, survival is a queer modality. Closeting is an act we have all engaged in at one point or another in order to survive.

### Conclusion

In late 2020, my interlocutors began raising issues around digital censorship, which they located within the context of FOSTA-SESTA and larger histories of other prohibitory and moralizing legislation. This legislation has had a chilling effect on digital queer communities throughout the pandemic, in part because this legislation entrenches homophobic ideas around sexual propriety in ways that are ripe for political manipulation. Effectively, FOSTA-SESTA has worked to create a digital landscape in which terms of service and community guidelines can be weaponized against content that dominant society finds distasteful or unsettling. The platforms that connected queer performers and artists with each other and with audiences during the pandemic are governed primarily by co-moderation, which has resulted in users disproportionately reporting queer, trans\*, and QTBIPOC content and accounts in targeted ways. These patchwork governance models have been employed, both through algorithms and user co-moderation, to effectively push transgressive queer bodies and content out of digital public space. But as this chapter demonstrates, the power to censor is not centralized or employed only by the platform and its algorithms. Rather there is a more nuanced decentralization of power at play in which individual users can interpret and apply terms of service and/or community standards in ways that may constitute targeted harassment and that are unlikely to be reviewed or overturned by staff. This chapter locates this phenomenon within a larger reactionary politics where homophobic, transphobic, racist, and conspiracist politics intersect.

The stories of Nicholas, Fran, and other performers highlight the importance of the kinds of narratives and images of queer and trans\* lives that are shared online. Living in a world where

images of trans\*, gender non-conforming, and otherwise transgressive queer bodies living well and joyfully means that queer people have no reassuring visual evidence of the possibilities of living well in queer bodies. In other words, who gets to be visible and whose stories get to be told and reproduced matter. Likewise, the images we do not show and the stories we do not tell have consequences. I have observed two overarching, and at times contradictory, trends in how my interlocutors have responded to these digital erasures, silences, and absences: spacemaking and survival. First, a number of performers centered taking up space and making space for transgressive art and artists through purposefully staging transgressive bodies. There was recurring talk of taking up space as a revolutionary political act, an intentional move to undermine homonormative logics, to privilege queer and particularly QTBIPOC artists and communities, and to unsettle cis-hetero audiences. But the threat of disconnection and breaking up online queer community spaces forced many of my interlocutors to change tactics to move out of the public sphere and into private digital spaces to avoid self-censorship and build safer and more reliable digital communities. This move towards prioritizing survival has at times been contradictory to the ethos of taking up space – taking up space centers queer visibility on public platforms whereas the move to private spaces restricts what images and art are publicly circulated, who might see them, and who might connect with these underground communities.

## **Chapter 6: Staging Truth to Power**

### Introduction

This chapter engages queer visibility through the lens of artistic practices and storytelling choices that, I argue, constitute a form of refusal. I begin this chapter by grounding this in my interlocutors understanding of taking up space in queer bodies as a radical act of resistance, care, and community-building, engaging with the specific ways in which my interlocutors responded to the expectations placed on them to tell queer stories through specific tropes and narratives of queer trauma. My interlocutors began to refuse those expectations in their work, ultimately moving to center queer joy, which I have argued throughout this dissertation constitutes a deliberate act of care. I then situate refusal in relation to my interlocutors' engagements with queer joy, care, and spacemaking, ultimately demonstrating how refusal was understood to be an inherently radical act and how staging non-normative bodies, stories, and expressions became an act of care.

### Finding Each Other Online

Returning to the issue of visibility – namely, whose stories are told, whose art and bodies may be seen, and whose are excluded – we have to consider how digital infrastructure in the wake of FOSTA-SESTA has pushed queer constituencies to the margins. While shadow banning keeps certain images and themes off of the public's screens, the continued flagging of queer content – whether that content is legitimately violating community standards or not – often results in certain accounts being banned. On Twitch and social media platforms, digital communities form around specific accounts, meaning we connect through specific Twitch channels as their chat boxes becoming a digital space to congregate and connect at pre-specified times every week. Likewise, we find each other through existing social media accounts and

networks. When accounts disappear without warning, these ways of connecting and building networks and communities are disrupted. It creates a form of chaos in which we have to continuously find each other again. In the winter and spring of 2021, it was not an uncommon experience to log onto Twitch to join and watch my interlocutors' weekly shows only to find that their channels had disappeared or that their livestreams had been taken down by the algorithm.

The first time this happened, I was taken aback. It was a Saturday night and I had logged on to a popular Toronto-based digital drag channel The Underground to watch a drag fundraiser for Maggie's Toronto, a charitable organization run by and for sex workers. I logged onto Twitch and found nothing. The channel was simply gone. Its familiar name did not appear in the list of channels I was subscribed to, no notification came to announce that the livestream had begun. I was puzzled – had I not just watched a performance here the night before? Was this not the night of the fundraiser? I scanned Twitter and Instagram looking for an update. I searched for their channel by name in Twitch's search bar and found no results. Where had this joyful little community of drag and burlesque artists gone? A few days later, I found them again on one of their producer's personal channels just as the host was thanking everyone who had found their new temporary home. This was not an isolated occurrence. In many conversations with performers and producers alike, we asked one another: "how do we stay connected like this? How do we find each other?"

### Taking Up Digital Space

Digital technologies have come to occupy a central role in contemporary queer worldmaking processes. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, queer people gathered in specific spaces that were culturally coded as queer; bars, restaurants, parks, theatres, and bathrooms served as social spaces for specific queer constituencies that offered opportunities for

communication, community, and sex (Cavalcante 2019). In North America, these spaces were often within consolidated enclaves of queer space, known colloquially as “gayborhoods” or “gay villages” (Meeker 2005). The 1990s ushered gentrification into gayborhoods across North America, intervening upon and cleansing these neighbourhoods for capital investment. In Toronto, this brought skyrocketing rents which priced queer institutions and residents out of the Village. The momentum of gentrification weakened the Village as the center of queer worldmaking it had once been. We now see a trend towards “queer cultural archipelagos” (Ghiziani 2014), or queer spaces that are smaller, fragmented, and more flexible than the gayborhood but which are vibrant locales of queer cultures and communities. Digital media and social media platforms are part of these archipelagos and serve multiple sociopolitical and cultural functions in queer life. Such platforms enabled communication, learning, teaching, and activism that was previously rooted in the physical institutions of the Village and many digital platforms now fulfill the social and sexual functions of the gay bar. The digital queer cultural archipelago enables the organization of new queer publics, counterpublics, and communities, facilitates the exchange of information about queer identities and lives, and serves as accessible intergenerational archival spaces of queer histories and collective memories (Cavalcante 2019; Fink and Miller 2014). The digital queer cultural archipelago – and the ability to find, access, and be in those spaces – became even more central to queer life and culture during the pandemic, as the few physical spaces which made up pieces of those archipelagos became inaccessible and gathering became an exclusively digital affair.

A recurring theme among my interlocutors was that taking up space – particularly when that space was desperately trying to push them out – was a radical act of resistance, care, and community-building. This was not new or specific to virtual space, but a political stance that

carried over from in-person stages. Time and time again, these artists described the act of putting transgressive bodies on stage – both in-person and virtually – as revolutionary transgressive acts. In April 2021, I attended another event in that queer cabaret festival in which queer burlesque artists spoke about the logistics of their performance practices, the business of it all. Those conversations kept returning to community-building and spacemaking – that is, how these artists make space for themselves and each other on stages that were not built for them. One legendary burlesque and performance artist said, “there’s no better place than the stage...I want to be seen and heard. And I’ve fought back against people who said I shouldn’t be there by taking up even more space”. One particular conversation that evening encapsulates that well:

Dee: “in terms of taking up space and belonging in places we aren’t supposed to be...we come from impossible peoples. I really believe this. BIPOC women and queer and trans women, we just are impossible peoples, we come from resilience and survivorship and magic. It’s woven into your DNA and we show up in spaces and places we aren’t supposed to be. Audre Lorde says we were never supposed to survive, so every time I see a Black woman on a platform or a stage, my heart flutters. And in the scope of whiteness, that extends to you, Tatiana, in that you’re not performing good “womanness”. Burlesque has this history of that, anyone who performs this kind of work is operating outside of the norm of what is good in terms of a good woman and propriety...it’s still shocking for a woman to make money off of her body and sexuality. I think it’s revolutionary that we do this.”

Tatiana: “I always say that if you’re bigger, you appear more naked to your audience than someone who is conventional size. That much flesh on stage becomes a political thing, it makes people nervous...I’m glad to see more opportunities for people on the stage and incorporate all different kinds of people and bodies. I just always wanted to have an all-inclusive stage. But it wouldn’t be as fun if we weren’t still pushing people’s buttons and if it wasn’t a little bit dangerous.”

Emery: “I think that to be a rule breaking woman in a body that is unconventional, be that because I’m in a racialized body that is white passing or that I’m in a plus sized body...it’s revolutionary to be on stage. When I wasn’t offered a seat at the table, I believed in bringing my own chair. And as my story evolved, I then believed in creating my own table. I have always been unabashed...if I am here, I deserve to be here. And I will show you why and I believe in bringing all of the misfits with me. We have an onus and a duty as performers to make way so that they have a chance too. I have always believed not in opening doors, but in kicking them down so that we can take that space...it’s a revolutionary act, as unique individuals taking up space in a world that wants to silence us.”

In this conversation, two racialized multi-disciplinary cabaret artists (Dee and Emery) of different body types, socio-economic backgrounds, and with different portfolios and work experiences are talking with a white plus-sized burlesque artist (Tatiana) about the leadership roles they have taken on in building community and space for diverse casts of performers. They describe not only taking up space for themselves, but also leveraging their positions to carve out and build new spaces for other performers. The very act of staging racialized, queer, trans\*, and transgressive bodies within a space that is designed to suppress and erase those representations is both an intentional political act and an act of spacemaking, community-building, and care.

The idea of staging transgressive bodies and art as revolutionary was something that came up time and time again in this conversation. Emery went on to explain that to her, being revolutionary did not look like “Che Guevara”, but rather looked more mundane. Staging transgressive bodies is political, it is an act of resistance, and it is also a tactic for navigating a world that was not built for non-normative bodies and queer ways of being and relating. Finding ways to stage transgressive bodies and artforms online is an extension of this pre-existing politics – finding spaces, even if they’re in private Zoom rooms that few people have the password to, is still a revolutionary act in a digital world that was built to exclude this community.

“Revolutionary living is a multitude of things,” Dee said softly before moving the conversation onto the economics of their work. What I have come to understand from my interlocutors is that finding ways to continue existing online while visibly queer without self-censoring is a political act grounded in larger histories of queer survival.

*Figure 11: A sketch of Bini in my fieldnotes.*



Bini as drawn in my fieldnotes. Their style of drag is what people might call “alternative”, complete with facial piercings and features overdrawn to be purposefully harsh and intimidating rather than feminized or conventionally attractive. Bini’s work often rages against the status quo; they’re not an angry person, per se, but their anger with injustices shapes their artistic practices. Bini is an activist-educator in their day job and has a knack for stirring the pot, causing problems, and making things happen.

Dee’s comment that “we were never supposed to survive” is referring first and foremost to Black women, but it extends to transgressive queer bodies that exist outside of homonormative logics. Survival has always been a queer modality; finding new ways to survive not only as

individuals but as communities has been central to queer activism for decades. Bini often talked about ways to potentially free queer communities and artists from dependence on these platforms and their parent corporations. Nearly every time I spoke to Bini, they told me stories about their friends in Europe who were working with community groups to build their own servers. This was something Bini saw as a potentially emancipatory project, one that would “fight against censorship, the monetization of our bodies by a corporation against our will, and the striking down of our own attempts to monetize our bodies in our own way as we see fit.” They would get quite animated, excited and hopeful, talking about taking the servers, the digital infrastructure, into queer communities’ hands. While an admirable idea, even Bini admits that it’s a highly specialized technical task that most people would not be able to undertake, that it isn’t a feasible large-scale response. Nonetheless, at the heart of Bini’s dream is a call for build new spaces, or to build our own spaces, as a means of circumventing the heteronormative rules and conventions that govern public digital space.

### Telling Stories About Queerness

Bini’s call to action – to circumvent heteronormative rules and ideas about queer life – were echoed in other interlocutor’s artistic practices. Violet’s oeuvre of work is particularly illustrative here. Violet is a queer Indigenous playwright, actor, and burlesque artist who I came to know after attending a reading of their new play over YouTube Live in the fall of 2020. In one of our interviews that year, as we spoke about mountains, land, and telling good stories, Violet said of their own storytelling choices:

“It became clear to me that the important thing for me to talk about, the important ideas and themes were about women, about Indigenous women, the things that I experienced growing up...there were lots of situations and experiences that I had and that I witnessed that weren’t being talked about. You know, the secrecy and some of the hidden aspects about the trauma that we go through. And then simultaneously the love and the joy and the community. So, for

me, it continues to be important that I uplift Indigenous women, 2-Spirit and trans\* folks in a way that allows us to see ourselves in the work. Representation is really important for me. Growing up I didn't have anyone that looked like me that wasn't a stereotype and there's something about watching someone's story and finding yourself in it, recognizing intrinsically that you're not alone. And there are lots of Indigenous women who have a specific type of life experience that I think often gets overlooked ... I try really hard to write stories for them...not just about our traumas but also about our feeling and our love and our laughter and our passion and joys.”

This concept of telling stories about love, laughter, passion, and joy – even and especially in the face of trauma and structural violence – was central to our conversation that day, and unbeknownst to me, would come to shape the entirety of this work. Violet was speaking to a different kind of representation in art and media, one which acknowledges trauma and violence but does not center it. A kind of representation, which instead, centers the dynamism of their community and their capacity for joy in the face of centuries of violence, genocide, and dispossession. Talking to Violet clarified for me this central distinction – that queer and marginalized people seeing ourselves represented in trauma narratives and tragedies was a representation of sorts, but not of our fullness and humanity and capacity for life in the face of violence, abandonment, and death. Rather, these trauma narratives were a representation of hegemonic heteronormative discourses of queerness as abject and inherently othering.

As we continued to talk, we told each other about our experiences discovering bisexuality and queerness as teenagers. Violet spoke about how when they grew up, they didn't talk about gender and sexuality. As a teenager, they had once confided in their cool older cousin whom they looked up to that they thought they were attracted to men and women; she told them sharply that bisexuality – a word that had not even been in their vocabulary – didn't exist. Of course, that experience is not unique – I, like most openly bisexual people, could have rattled off a list of all the people who made similar declarations when I came out. “That was my reality,” Violet said, “and as much as that was my reality and as much as queer people all know that this happens all

the time, I just didn't feel like that was the story I wanted to tell. We've already heard *that* story". I nodded along – the story of the exploration of queerness being injurious, of coming out being met with rejection, was not new. This narrative that burgeoning queerness necessarily means victimhood, rejection, violence, and impending tragedy has been among the dominant narratives of queerness in the Western cultural imaginary and popular culture. As Caprioglio (2021) explains in her research on queer narratives and queer representation in popular television:

“Experiences and articulations of queerness and of trauma appear linked ... this linkage is potentially formative of deeper patterns. If television provides role models and representations that may affect or attempt to reflect the identification and social expectation of its viewers (Gomillion & Giuliano, 2011), the implication here for queer viewers may be that queer identity itself is predicated on experiencing trauma – that if one identifies as queer and has not already been traumatized, expect to survive trauma in the future. These narratives do not only affect those seeking queer role models, either; TV's status as a mass medium means that this message speaks to viewers generally, especially in its consistent repetition (Gerbner, 1998). Moreover, the implication of childhood/adolescent trauma as linked to queer identity may have impacts for the continued naturalization of institutional, systemic, and interpersonal, especially familial, queerphobic violence. The demand that queer individuals confess their trauma within these narrative arcs also places the onus on queer individuals themselves to call out queerphobic violence and institutional modes of queer traumatization. They cannot, apparently, expect the systems that have traumatized them to provide a route to change” (2021, 462).

Likewise, the queer figure as abject, immoral, and devious has also occupied a central place in that imaginary (see Butler 1993; Stryker 2006; Halperin 2007). Even within queer studies, the “queer death drive” has been a dominant analytical lens for framing queer life (Edelman 2004) which queer theorists like Munoz (2009) have sought to unseat. These particular imaginings of queerness as inherently tragic and/or traumatic are so familiar, so deeply engrained in the cultural imaginary, that they come to shape how heteronormative society frames and interacts with queer communities in such a way that ultimately serves to (re)produce these narratives as natural and

innate. Within that context, the rejection of these framings – the refusal to reproduce stories of rejection, trauma, and tragedy – is a radical departure.

One of the storylines that wove through the play *Violet* was workshoping in 2020 was of a teenaged girl discovering her sexuality and confiding about her queerness to her two-spirit cousin. The play itself was about a family coming together to deal with the death of their matriarch, celebrating and grieving a lifetime’s worth of choices, slights, and joys. The queer characters in that play were never met with hostility, homophobia, or transphobia. In fact, their queerness was almost incidental to the family drama unfolding on the screen; it was an important part of who those characters were, but it did not drive conflict or serve as a plot device. It was not a play about queerness; rather, it was a play written by a queer person featuring queer characters acted by queer actors. The ways in which queerness manifested in this play were very intentional on Violet’s part. They told me that they did not want these characters to be conflicted or to have people misgender them. They said, “we know that story and we know that happens! It has happened in all of our lives. But that is not the story I want to perpetuate. Let’s look ahead – what are the ways that families start to accept us and are play with us? Because that exists too!”

*Violet* is not denying that trauma exists or claiming that violence does not weave an insidious path through queer communities. In fact, what *Violet* is doing in refusing to center trauma and violence is an explicit acknowledgment that they are incredibly powerful, potent, formative experiences for so many marginalized peoples. The family in their play works through intergenerational trauma, through colonial violence and a genocidal loss of culture, through the inability to communicate with each other – these hallmarks of trauma are present and the realities and legacies of violence cannot be separated or removed from the scene. To pretend that they are not there would be disingenuous. Nevertheless, *Violet* makes a very intentional storytelling

choice to center healing and living full and complex lives with and beyond trauma rather than letting trauma subsume the story. The presence of trauma and violence in our lives cannot be erased or wished away, but the ways in which we engage with the realities of violence against our communities need not perpetuate trauma narratives. There is a radical and emancipatory potential in choosing to decenter trauma from our stories of queerness.

Me: “This could have very well been a trauma story. It could have easily been encompassed by grief and those characters easily could have spent two hours swimming in that”

Violet: “Yeah. Like can we just let queer and non-binary characters be queer and non-binary? Why do we have to make [the play] about that? Why can’t we just exist? We just exist! It doesn’t have to be *about* that...they just happen to be queer and other things are happening in their lives.

Me: “Exactly. Queerness does not have to be a source of conflict!”

“Exactly! Yes, exactly!” we both continued to yell at nobody in particular, our faces lit up with the radical potentialities of refusal.

### Refusing Trauma Narratives

While Violet did not use the word “refusal” when talking about their rejection of narrative tropes in their storytelling, I argue that this move towards centering queer life and queer joy is predicated on the conscious refusal of dominant logics and narratives of queerness amongst my interlocutors. Specifically, my interlocutors are refusing the (re)produce and engage with trauma narratives or to make queer stories legible to cis-heterosexual audiences through trauma narratives and tropes. Moreover, it is my contention – as I have articulated through this work – that these choices to center queer joy and to refuse queer trauma are part of a larger politics of care. Therefore, the relationship between refusal, joy, and care must be understood in the context of the trauma narratives that are being rejected here.

Trauma is often conceptualized medically, in relation to physical injury or wounds, or psychologically, as a set of responses a person has to an adverse event. In a broader sense, we can understand trauma as relational, as an event or process which “sheers us off from our expected connections with others, from our perceived social supports, from our basic sense of safety, however locally construed” (Lester 2013, 754). In this sense, trauma is rooted in “social, cultural, and personal understandings about what is necessary for a healthy, full life” (Lester 2013, 755). Fassin and Rechtman (2009) trace the socio-cultural genealogy of trauma as a concept and a narrative. Taking the Holocaust as a starting point, they argue that contemporary understandings of collective trauma emerged from the gradual process of collective remembering of the concentration camps, which came through the writings and testimonies of survivors, popular media depictions, and commemoration procedures and events. The socio-cultural discovery of concentration camps gave the concept of trauma a social presence and transformed it into a socially meaningful concept that carried with it the idea that one must witness and testify to the memory of those who have suffered (Fassin and Rechtman 2009). In this cultural focus on witnessing, testimony became a political act, effectively politicizing emotional pain and creating specific narratives and framings through which traumatic experiences must be filtered and recounted in order to be seen as legitimate. The ways in which victims are expected to frame and talk about their trauma is meant to signpost the legitimacy or authenticity of their experiences in a way that is universally legible and recognizable as acceptable forms of suffering.

However, as Fassin and Rechtman (2009) argue, the move to recount traumatic experiences in ways that are universalizable necessarily flattens nuance and disconnects or removes trauma from the individual and personal histories of those who experienced it. This flattening can obfuscate a victim’s own experiences or identities and it can serve to obscure their

experiences of marginalization. For example, victims of Hurricane Katrina were already victims of poverty and racial and class inequities before the mass trauma event of the storm; however, the ways in which Katrina's survivors are invited and expected to speak to their experiences is within a framework that cannot hold space for those complexities and instead must obscure them. Within this context, we can understand trauma narratives as focused on the articulation of predetermined and universally recognizable forms of trauma in an acceptable way. This both flattens the lived experiences of the traumatized *and* demands that marginalized communities reimagine their experiences within this framework in order to be legible and recognizable.

What Violet, Nicholas, and many of my interlocutors experienced from audiences, producers, funders, and other culture workers for years before pandemic was a demand to fit their stories into a dominant narrative about queerness which always already envisions queerness as a wounding process. This is rooted in a dominant and familiar narrative within cis-heteronormative culture in which queerness is the source of conflict or suffering which drives queer stories; that is, in which trauma is inherent to queer life. It is through that logic that queer characters or artists have become recognizable as subjects to these audiences. The demand for stories by and/or about queer people which center trauma narratives is a demand to render queer people victims or suffering bodies relegated to the "suffering slot" (Robbins 2013) and to center the agency of cis-hetero audiences to intervene upon those suffering bodies. It is demand to "show us what has been done to you" and to render that legible through very specific tropes that will not make cis-hetero audiences uncomfortable.

In discussing the use of trauma narratives and the traumatized queer figure, it is instructive to turn to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1990) and Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (2014), all of whom argue that the subaltern is invited to speak only to and of their pain in damaged-

centered narratives. That the pain of the Other – however that Other is constructed – is fetishized by dominant social groups is not a new proposition; speaking specifically to racialized violence, Saidiya Hartman illustrates that the personhood of racialized people in the white cultural imaginary – and particularly Black people in the liberal white imaginary – is constructed in relation to pain, “making personhood coterminous with injury” (1997, 93). As Sara Ahmed (2011) argues, it is the recognition (or misrecognition) of others as different or apart from ourselves which brings our own subjectivity into being – what Althusser calls interpellation (2014). Put simply, the Other comes to be recognized as persons in the white liberal imaginary through violation and victimization in such a way that reinforces the need to intervene upon or save that Other.

Violet purposefully did not engage with the logics of these framings; in intentionally not rendering their experiences legible or easily mappable onto trauma narratives or other dominant tropes about queerness, they engaged in a kind of refusal. As Audra Simpson (2011) argues, there is a political alternative to the Hegelian framework of recognition and misrecognition – refusal. Refusal, as Simpson (2011) conceptualizes it, is both a political and ethical stance that is in contrast to the desire to be recognized within a framework that always already misrecognizes and dehumanizes marginalized communities as Other and apart. Rather than fighting to be recognized within that framework, Simpson argues that one can refuse these logics altogether, refuse the legitimacy of “those who are usually in the position of recognizing” (2011, 11) to confer alterity upon us at all. Violet’s refusal is not unique; in fact, varying kinds of refusal of hegemonic discourses and dominant narratives of queerness characterized much of my interlocutors’ work and art during the pandemic.

What does that mean, then, in the context of these issues of (in)visibility, censorship, and harassment online? The crux is that the images we show, the stories we tell – or those which we do not show and do not tell – are incredibly important. In chapter five, I wrote about a conversation I had with Fran. It was Fran’s experience that representations of queerness and queer stories in popular media and in much of the performing arts community still centered stories about cis white gay men. She said, “their stories keep on being told and they eventually get to dictate who else’s stories get told”. In practice, this meant that the narratives, discourses, and images that we consume and become accustomed to – the image worlds and media worlds that these stories create – were based in cis white men’s ideas and understandings of what queer, trans, and particularly QTBIPOC stories are and can be. As I argue here and in the following chapter, those narratives of queer stories (re)produce heteronormative and homonormative ideas about queerness and queer life that are ultimately harmful.

This phenomenon was especially compounded for QTBIPOC community members, whose pain was so often fetishized within the media and stories circulated about them and who were so often invited to speak only within the confines of damage-centered narratives. Saidiya Hartman (1997) offers a key framing through which we can understand this phenomenon. In *Scenes of Subjection*, Hartman proposes that the personhood of Black people, and particularly Black women, in the white liberal imaginary in the United States has always been constructed in relation to their pain, “making personhood coterminous with injury” (1997, 93). Essentially, Hartman argues that Othered bodies come to be recognized as persons in the imaginary of the dominant social group only when those bodies are in states of victimization and are therefore ripe to be saved or intervened upon by that dominant group. That is to say, the dominant social group is receptive to and recognizes the Other if/when that Other can map their lives onto a

victim-saviour narrative that reduces their existence to trauma and injury. The trauma narrative is what enables the dominant social group to recognize the Other's humanity. Simultaneously, the Other becomes recognizable as human *only* in relation to that trauma narrative, making the personhood coterminous with pain. They are traumatized, therefore they *are*. While Hartman is writing specifically about Black experiences in the American context, the core idea that the Other is conferred personhood only when that Other is wounded and able to articulate and present that injury in a way that is legible to the dominant group, enabling the dominant group to intervene upon or save them, is applicable here. That is to say, it is reminiscent of how the cis-heteronormative gaze recognizes the personhood of trans\*, queer, and especially QTBIPOC communities as being coterminous with trauma.

One way that this manifests is through specific requests for trans\* artists to perform identity-based pieces about trauma, injury, and pain for organizations or venues catering to a predominantly white, cis/hetero audience. In a Zoom interview, Nicholas alluded to the toll that focus on trauma takes.

“Me: I really appreciate that [your channel] is celebrating queer people just having a good time...it's just queer people hanging out, existing, and being fabulous. That's not something we see a lot of.

Nicholas: We're just hanging out! ... I mean, we had conversations when we started out that we wanted this to be a positivity focused space and now we have conversations if we want to change that. Like if there's something we really want to say or talk about, we say “okay everyone, this is really pissing me off and I want to block out some time to talk about it”. You know? Noah took some time during February to do that. Dante and I took the whole [of February] off so that Dante wouldn't have to deal with any of that. All of these producers were not even booking Black people in February and that was just awful. So we took some time out to not focus on the negativity for a while. But yeah, celebration is a big part of our channel because too many people ask us about our trauma and trans\* people watching the channel don't want to be retraumatized.

Me: Yeah, I just don't really get why some people want or need to consume that? The trauma porn of it all. Like hello, what does that do for you?

Nicholas: I really don't know! I'm paid frequently enough by a lot of straight people to say *that stuff*...I have no idea what they get out of it...but I at least get money."

This dynamic, in which queer and trans\* artists are hired specifically to "say that stuff" or talk about their trauma, shapes how Nicholas and his collaborators frame the artistic works they make, produce, and platform. In catering their work to an audience of queer and trans\* community members, they are rejecting the narrative boxes they are so often asked or required to slot into. In contrast to how the white liberal imaginary constructs the Other as a subject in relation to their pain and trauma, Violet, Nicholas, and their collaborators are creating spaces in which queer and trans\* people recognize each other's humanity and subjecthood through joy and celebration rather than through injury. Celebrating queerness is a radical departure in this sense that moves away from personhood being "coterminous with injury" (Hartman 1997, 93). Rather, as this chapter will elucidate, the dominant message in many of my interlocutors' work is: I exist – and that is a triumph. I celebrate life, therefore I am.

That is not to say that *all* queer artists feel this way, or that indeed, holding these beliefs privately means that an artist will refuse paid work to perform queer trauma. The reality is more complicated; even while having these conversations unprompted, many of these interlocutors would still go on to perform what they called "trauma porn" for paid gigs during the pandemic. That was something they saw as necessary in some circumstances, either for financial reasons or because they were using trauma narratives and tropes as a means to tell stories about hope and perseverance. Elsie, for example, was working on and performing a one-person show throughout the pandemic which told her life story, from being a closeted teenager and young adult in rural Ontario, to experiencing terrible homophobia for years, to living openly as a gay man and drag performer. That story was rife with trauma, but ultimately used trauma as a device to ground and orient a story about hope, joy, resilience, and triumph. The story Elsie tells in her show is not a

queer trauma trope, it is a celebration of living an openly queer life in spite of the challenges she faced. Elsie spoke at times of how staging some of the most traumatic elements of her life was therapeutic to her; and indeed, it is not uncommon for people of all identities to find artistic expressions of traumatic experiences to be therapeutic or necessary. When I refer to trauma narratives or trauma porn, then, I am referring to very specific narratives of queer trauma that are staged for cis-heteronormative audiences and which dehumanize queer people, position them as always already and forever victims, and which presume queer existence as inherently tragic.

*Figure 12: A drawing of Allegra performing on Zoom*



In this drawing, Allegra is performing a lip sync on a Zoom drag show. She is on the verge of tears in this image, but will later begin to openly cry. She is sporting a wig and makeup look resembling Lady Gaga's tribute to the late David Bowie, while performing an unrelated pop ballad reflecting on the presidency of Donald Trump. Allegra ended the performance by delicately wiping her tears and saying "fuck I hate drag" to someone off camera.

## Conclusion

This chapter explored refusal and its relationship to visibility, queer joy, and care practices, laying the groundwork for an engagement with the potentialities of queer joy in the following chapter. I have presented and rearticulated my interlocutors' arguments that staging non-normative bodies, ideas, presentations, and stories were radical acts that refused dominant logics of heteronormativity and respectability. My interlocutors understood this as deeply intertwined with the expectation that they engage and render themselves legible subjects through dominant logics or trauma narratives about queerness. Likewise, they understood the rejection of those framings as a deliberate – and political – choice to center queer joy. They already understood this as a deliberate choice – which I have categorized as a kind of refusal – that was inextricable from their own care practices. This chapter opened with the question of visibility – namely, who gets to be visible and who is under threat of losing that privilege by deviating from norms? Ultimately, my interlocutors understood that they walked a fine line between being visible through rendering themselves legible and recognizable subjects through conforming to trauma narratives and, on the other hand, creating something new that was built on care and joy that would almost certainly result in losing that visibility. The chapter that follows takes up the question of what it would mean to only tell stories about queerness that refuse trauma and attempts to articulate the potentialities of centering queer joy, keeping this delicate issue of visibility in mind.

## Chapter 7: Towards Queer Joy

### Introduction

How, then, do we tell stories about marginalized communities (or as members of marginalized communities) without rendering them legible through normative logics – that is, without framing those stories solely around trauma and injury? Put differently, what does it mean and look like to move towards queer joy? These questions have echoed throughout my fieldwork and I contend that their answers can be found in the choices my interlocutors made in telling stories for and about themselves and their communities. Time and time again, this question brings me back to Violet’s words: “I just think,” they sighed, “that we need to be looking towards telling stories of healing, rather than trauma”. The refusal to engage or (re)produce dominant narratives and representations of trans\* and queer life – particularly trauma narratives – is an intentional centering of care and a very particular politics of representation and refusal in the creative process. This chapter seeks to answer these questions through an exploration of how my interlocutors made space to celebrate queer joy, excellence, and, at times, outright silliness.

This chapter begins with a story about the Monarchs’ Trans Day of Remembrance show and the conversations the hosts and their guests had about feeling limited by the expectations from certain audiences that they perform “serious numbers about trauma”. Bringing this back to the concepts of joy and refusal, I then move into discussing how creating space for other kinds of performance – for silliness and joy – constitutes a form of refusal. I argue here that the focus on queer and trans joy and silliness and escapism, paired with the intentional steps my interlocutors took to build safe spaces, is a radical act. I then shift to reflecting on an interview with Billie and their work to create safe queer spaces. I highlight Billie’s work and words as another perspective and approach to centering queer joy as a care tactic; here, I argue that the

work Billie does to create space is as important as the art they make in that space. Finally, I end this chapter by reflecting on the ways in which centering queer joy may be unsettling or discomfoting to some. Reflecting on my own experiences of defending this research at a conference, I argue that moving towards queer joy does not erase or deny violence and oppression and restate my position that queer joy does not and should not exist in neat binary opposition to talking about and acknowledging real and lived violence and trauma.

### On Joy and Silliness

On a Friday night in late November 2020, I tuned into The Monarchs' Twitch channel to watch the then weekly drag show hosted by Micah and Noah. This particular drag show took place on Transgender Day of Remembrance (TDOR), an annual observance that honours the lives of trans\* people who were killed in acts of transphobic violence. As was custom for The Monarchs, Micah opened the show with a land acknowledgment and Noah set the rules for the space; "if you don't support Black Lives Matter and Land Back," Noah said, "This. Is. Not. The. Space. For. You." Micah began the performances that night, lip syncing "World of Pure Imagination" in a full Gene Wilder as Willy Wonka costume. Their live performance was followed by a mix of pre-recorded and live performances from other local drag artists, including Georgia and Ollie. The tenor of the show was quite lively and the performances joyful and sometimes silly. Then, at the halfway point of the show, Micah reappeared on screen in front of a greenscreen backdrop filled with pink, white, and blue flickering candles. They began reading a lengthy statement acknowledging TDOR. Slowly and with great care, they began to explain how transphobic violence impacted their community, noting the myriad ways in which that violence was compounded and intensified for racialized and Indigenous, disabled, and poor trans\* people.

They read a quote from Gwendolyn Anne Smith, who started the first TDOR in 1999, explaining the significance of the day:

“TDOR seeks to highlight losses we face to anti-transgender bigotry and violence. I am no stranger to the need to fight for our rights, and the right to simply exist is first and foremost. With so many seeking to erase transgender people, sometimes in the most brutal ways possible, it is vitally important that those we lose are remembered and that we continue to fight for justice.”

Micah then began to read the names of the two trans\* people who were murdered in Canada and the twenty-eight who were murdered in the United States in 2019, their voice cracking after the first few names as tears began to well in their eyes. Wiping the tears from their eyes, Micah told the audience, “I’m a bit overwhelmed. But I’m going to keep us moving right along because we didn’t come here to be sad”. Moments later, a Rihanna song began playing and a local drag king replaced Micah on screen, the virtual stage flipping quickly from somber to a boisterous celebration.

The next night, Saturday, The Monarchs hosted a Trans Excellence Show for Trans Awareness Week. This time, Nicholas and Dante were hosting. Like the previous night, pre-recorded video performances were interspersed between live numbers. Dante performed first that evening, dancing and voguing live in front of the non-binary flag. Later in the evening, Nicholas would play a pre-recorded video of himself performing a burlesque routine to “Sweet Transvestite” from the queer cult classic film, the Rocky Horror Picture Show. Following each performance, both live and recorded, the performer would join Nicholas and Dante on screen via a Zoom camera feed to discuss their journeys as artists and their transness. It was this night that I met Elke, a two-spirit drag performer who had contributed a stunning pre-recorded performance of a rock song with the production value of a professional music video. In their interview following their number, Elke spoke about how so many TDOR events – particularly those

programmed by predominantly cisgender/heterosexual organizations – were explicitly hiring performers to do political numbers that centered around experiences of trauma and violence rather than attempting to showcase the breadth and talent of trans\* artistry, Elke explained that this work felt limiting to them. “I get booked for ‘trans themed shows’,” they said, “but I don’t do identity-based pieces. So then I end up following very serious numbers about trauma and the crowd is not having it. I’ve fucked up at Pride like that, actually”. Elke was known for their comedy and their hosting abilities – outrageous performances, ad-libbing, and silliness was their game. That put them in an odd position. They continued to say that they didn’t particularly like doing what they called “serious pieces”, because their aesthetic and performance style was “unserious”. They elaborated, “I get [serious pieces] and then people just wait the whole time for the punch line, and I find it takes away from what I’ve done. And I don’t want to come across as mocking when I’m doing something serious”.

As Elke talked about these experiences, the chat lit up with messages from audience members. As Elke described their drag as “unserious”, one viewer wrote “all drag is valid!”. Another, responding to the uncomfortable box Elke felt pushed into, wrote “ugh, it’s cis gawking”. “I don’t always want to do numbers about *being* trans. That’s draining...” Nicholas chimed in as Elke finished, putting into words the sentiment that had been just beneath the surface of Elke’s commentary. As Elke and Nicholas talked, they began to delineate between trans\* art and art about *being* trans\*. This delineation between being a queer artist and making art about being queer – or about very particular understandings of what it means to be queer – echoed throughout many of my interlocutors’ artistic processes. Elke explained it like this, “if the show is highlighting trans\* artists, the work shouldn’t need to be about being trans\*. Not a lot of my art is about *being* Indigenous, but I still get booked for Indigenous shows where the angle is

like let's look at what Indigenous artists do well". This analogy seemed to resonate with the audience, as the live chat lit up with supportive messages and the hosts nodded along. After thinking about Elke's words for a moment, Dante began to speak. "With some shows, it's about being visible...here are some folks that are visibly living their lives and we want you to show the struggle," he said, pausing to consider his words carefully, "which is fine. I guess. But then, also, we should be able to celebrate and be *excellent*. Like, this is a trans\* space, just show up and do your art." Nicholas nodded along to Dante's words, mulling them over, while Elke exclaimed "don't expect that this [trauma] is all that this community is going to do or be. I am more than that, we are more than that".

In a Zoom interview early in my fieldwork, Micah and I talked at length about building spaces that were both safe for the audiences and which offered a place of escape and celebration. They explained to me that even before the pandemic, when the Monarchs were performing in person at one of the only accessible and trans\* friendly venues on Church Street, they had intentionally tried to curate a space that was community focused. They tried very hard to make a space that was "representative of the actual scope of our community," they explained, "so I think our audience comes knowing, you know, that our shows are primarily trans\* performers, that we try to focus on BIPOC representation and having performers of colour on our stage regularly and as a major part of our line up." When they moved to Twitch during the pandemic, the amount of curatorial and moderating control they had over their channel enabled them to curate that space with more ease; for example, they were able to ban the accounts of users who posted problematic or offensive messages in the live chat and immediately remove them from the digital space. Moreover, producing shows in in-person venues had come with a responsibility to represent that venue's values and brand in a certain light, which limited how The Monarchs could respond to an

audience member behaving badly. Moving online imposed its own politics – discussed in previous chapters – but it also enabled them to jettison the expectations that came with in-person venues; ultimately, this enabled them to build a space that they felt was even more reflective of their community because it was beholden to their own set of values rather than those imposed by venue management.

*Figure 13: A drawing of Micah performing on Zoom in 2021, from my notebook.*



I was keen to tease out a potential tension between the Monarchs direct intentional political statements and their purposeful focus on queer joy and refusal of trauma. The Monarchs themselves had a difficult time articulating the role politics played in making space for queer joy, acknowledging that the political stances they take to set rules and the tone of the space to enable that joy inherently required holding space for an acknowledgement of the trauma they were

rejecting. Micah and I had talked about intention and politics in depth, probing whether their work was intentionally and/or inherently political. Micah felt that the very existence of the artforms they practiced – drag and burlesque – was inherently political: “yeah, it is inherently political, but I realize that when I say that I’m using a wider sense of what politics mean. Like I guess I mean that it is intentional, and statement based, you know?” What became clear from our conversations and the time I spent immersed in the Monarchs channel and body of work was that curating and building a safe community space for queer artists and audiences that platformed queer, trans, and particularly QTBIPOC artists, was political in that broader sense as much as it was a care tactic. That being said, the Monarchs rarely performed or staged expressly political or identity-based pieces – and this distinction is crucial. Instead, they staged escapist, absurdist, and clownish performances with the express intention of creating a space for queer and trans\* joy. As Micah explained,

“I think that people come [to our shows] because they want to see these types of performers that we invite, and also because I think generally as the pandemic drags on, I think people are looking for an escape. Or even just entertainment. And maybe that’s enough! You know? Or if you’re feeling isolated? Or are literally just isolated? Being able to connect to other people whose purpose is just to be a clown for you, I imagine that’s nice.”

When Nicholas and I talked about this, he laughed and said “yeah anything that’s stupid, I really like doing stupid numbers!” It wasn’t that Nicholas never did what he called “emotional” numbers – he did – but what gave him joy and inspired him to keep going was taking a meme or an outlandish theme and turning it into a campy comedic video performance. For example, when we had this conversation, Nicholas had recently performed a pre-recorded video number in which his computer transports him to the corporate headquarters of Pepperidge Farms so that he can hack into their mainframe and give goldfish crackers to everyone. When I asked Nicholas about it, he shrugged and said “I just really like goldfish, so I did that number. That gives me joy.

And it kind of felt like a bad homage to hacking scenes from 90s movies, you know? It was just hilarious to me”. Like so many of Nicholas’ performances, it was delightfully absurd to watch and it left his co-hosts and myself doubled over laughing.

Another stand out performance in Nicholas’ oeuvre was a live lip sync to “Let It Go” from the Disney movie *Frozen*. For this performance, Nicholas donned an Elsa Halloween costume. In the middle of the performance, he began to blow up balloons and held them, ends pinched between his fingers, in front of his chest like cartoonish breasts before releasing them so that they flew across the room in dramatic fashion as they lost air. When the music ended, he began to yell “I’m getting top surgery! It’s finally happening!”. Nicholas was beaming and ecstatic as his co-host Dante started screaming and jumping around in joy with him. Nicholas’ performance was far from high brow art; it was delightfully silly and a moment of pure celebration of a major milestone in his transition that he got to share with his co-creators and audience. And the audience responded in kind, roaring to life in the live chat box, sending affirming messages that read “wow I love being trans” and “being trans is soooooo good”.

This focus on queer and trans\* joy, silliness, and escapism, paired with the intentional steps they took to build safe spaces that have been outlined in previous chapters, may seem a relatively simple and innocuous practice. However, performing, producing, and staging silly and delightful art that centers and stems from queer people hanging out, taking up space, existing authentically, and having a good time together is a radical act. It is political in the sense that the focus on queer joy intentionally refuses to reproduce culturally prescribed narratives or paths for what queer life can, might, or should look like, and it is a departure from the norm of what was economically possible (i.e. bookable and profitable) in in-person venues. Even those performances which Nicholas described as “silly” or “unserious” or which Micah described as

being purely for the sake of entertainment were engaged in the practice of creating a safe space for queer and trans\* people unmarred by the potential for trauma, retraumatization, and violence.

*Figure 14: A drawing of a performance from my sketchbook.*



In this image, one of Nicholas's friends and collaborators is singing a love song to a puppet while a cloud effect floats around them. At the time, they were experimenting with the use of puppets and ventriloquy in their drag practice.

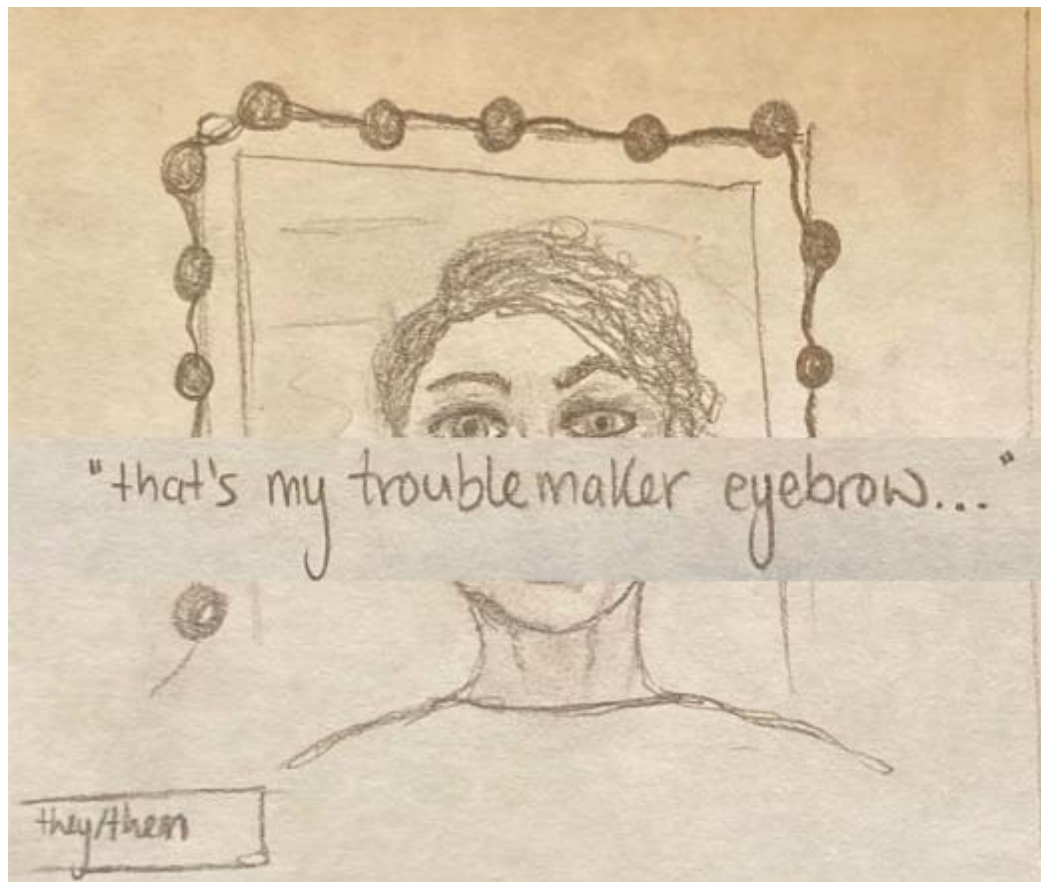
### Imag(in)ing Joy

On a stormy February morning, Billie's face stared up at me from my phone as we chatted on Zoom. Billie is wrapped in a blanket on their end, sitting in their bedroom in their parents' farm in rural Ontario. Steam rises off of a teacup as Billie raises it to their mouth and I felt a twinge of envy in my cold room. A few nights prior, Billie and I connected over a community open mic they hosted on Zoom. While open to the entire queer community, the open mic had centered QTBIPOC community members. It was a welcoming space – folks read poems,

performed songs, and shared deeply personal experiences. It was a rare space for kindling queer intimacies in an increasingly depersonalized digital realm. That event was evolving, Billie explained. It started as a little poetry slam and community hang out at a café in the Village that had since closed; it was a place where Billie went to make queer friends, that bloomed out of relations of care between community members. It was a creative and performance space that lifted the spirits – platonic queer intimacies have a tendency to do that. Billie went on, “being able to talk or sing or dance or bang a drum to feelings that you are unable to express elsewhere is so important...we want to offer that unconditional acceptance of your art. Come, share your art and what you’ve created...we won’t ever tell you that it’s bad or unnecessary because the expression of that is important”.

Billie’s face occupies most of my screen while my own is neatly framed in a little box in the top corner. We’re discussing the dramatic qualities and intensities of our eyebrows and the joy of painting them on. They lean in towards the screen and whisper conspiratorially, “this is my troublemaker eyebrow. So now you know when I’m up to something.” Billie sighs and continues, “I just have a lot of emotions, you know? I like stories to have happy endings. I recognize that our lives are not stories, but I also know that the collections of moments in our lives can all have happy endings if that is the way we choose to tell them”. I end with Billie’s words because they encapsulate the essence of this dissertation. Queer and trans lives are not stories. They are real. They are lived. They are complicated and nuanced and quite often defy narrative conventions, just as any human life does. But the moments of our lives that become stories – that become art and narrative and sometimes histories – those are indeed shaped by how we choose to tell them.

*Figure 15: A drawing of Billie in my sketchbook.*



This drawing of Billie was rendered in my sketchbook following our first interview. This sketch depicts Billie in our Zoom conversation, with a box in the bottom left of the screen reading “they/them”. They used this Zoom account for their performance work, and so this box had actually contained their stage name – which I have omitted – in addition to their pronouns. Billie has a unique warmth and vibrant presence about them, on and off the stage, that translated even through Zoom. On a personal level, drawing my interlocutors in such a way that encapsulated how they made me feel was an important complement to online research. For me, this was a grounding element of online fieldwork; as other sections of this work allude to, digital modes of communication have flattening and dehumanizing effects. The physical act of fleshing out faces on the page felt like bringing flesh and bone into work that was conducted mostly in physical isolation.

Billie words about their troublemaker eyebrow are scrawled across the sketch of their face. Through all of our conversations and my viewings of their oeuvre of work, this line has always stuck with me. I think that it has, in part, because it is so quintessentially them, but also because the delivery of the line, the wink and nod of it in the midst of an otherwise serious conversation about storytelling and its consequences, encapsulated so much of the camp and magic of queer performance practices. This stood out even more as the pandemic drew on and performers became more frustrated, alienated, and lonely; even with the move away from focusing on trauma and sad events, so many performers gradually burned out and, while they still showed up and did their work, their affect and energy was noticeably different. Even when one could hear exhaustion and defeat in Billie’s voice or see it forming around their eyes as time drew on, these sparks of camp and silliness and joy always shone through.

Billie's work is another example of making space for queer joy that I want to highlight here. Billie's oeuvre of performances is campy and joyful and often involve plays on queer pop culture references like the Rocky Horror Picture Show and the television show Our Flag Means Death. Their art centers celebrating queer aesthetics and queer culture, and there is a palpable reverence for the legends of queer art of came before them in the costuming and details of their performances. That sense of celebration and the intention to harken the audience back to other parts of queer culture that gave so many people a sense of joy and wonderment is what drives Billie. But their work to create safe queer spaces – and the conspiratorial way in which they do that – is as important as the art they make. By that, I mean that centering queer joy can look like Billie's oeuvre of work, but it also looks like building a digital poetry slam and café space for queer people to connect, spend time together and recharge. Centering queer joy is, at its core, an intentional spacemaking and community-building practice intended to sustain the social existence and life of the community, which in turns constitute an effort to build communities of care.

### Joy and Discomfort

In 2022, I shared the story of Nicholas announcing his gender affirmation surgery in his Elsa number as part of a conference presentation at the American Anthropology Association annual meeting in Seattle. There was a mixed response that Sunday morning. Some people were deeply moved by the story itself, and some were moved by the argument, the idea of centering queer joy. Yet, there were some who found the idea of centering queer joy to be problematic. Another queer scholar was adamantly opposed to this shift, articulating that even engaging with the concept of queer joy took away from or erased the very real threats, struggles, and violence faced by queer and trans peoples are every day, especially in parts of the world where their very

existence was a criminal act. I do not discount this critique – talking about joy when your people are dying is jarring, to put it mildly. However, I argued then, and continue to argue today, that moving towards queer joy does not erase or deny structural violence, past or present. Queer joy need not exist in binary opposition to being frank, honest, and realistic about violence. What it does is refuse the idea that queerness is an inevitable life sentence to misery, tragedy, and death. It refuses the logic of violence imposed upon us when we are recognized as other. This is why queer joy is radical – and, I would argue – all the more important in the face of oppression and violence.

In the interest of clarity, let me further state that I do not understand the decentering of trauma narratives to mean that we cannot talk or make art about our lived experiences of homophobic, transphobic, and gender-based and sexualized violence, nor the various formations of violence and oppressions that queer and trans people of intersecting identities live day to day. Refusal in this case does not deny those realities or close off our access to these experiences – rather, it is a radical refusal to existence as always already wounded. To be frank, my interlocutors experienced structural violence throughout my fieldwork. We can look to Violet, for example, who continues to live under a settler colonial state and whose art engages directly with the daily lived experiences of colonialism, violence, and dispossession. To call this anything but violence would be disingenuous. Despite this, Violet chose to move to stories of joy and healing. Their refusal of trauma narratives and their embrace of joy does not deny violence; it denies a framing of their existence as inherently tragic. In that refusal, there is a reclamation of the narrative, of agency, and of power. This is part of what makes queer joy radical.

## The Stakes of Centering Joy

What happens when we center queer trauma rather than queer joy? As Noble (2013) argues, the stakes are that these trauma narratives and injurious images become the only visible and knowable options for queer life. That possibility is problematic for queer people who cannot find reassuring evidence that they may live well and fully in their own bodies. Moreover, as I have already argued, it enables the perpetuation of damaging dominant narratives of queer suffering as fact, which in turn may be used as justification for anti-queer and, particularly, anti-trans behaviours and policies. That is to say, reinforcing the idea that queerness or transness is always already damaging comes to enable worldviews and policies, for example, that seek to limit the ability of young people to receive gender-affirming care in the name of protecting them from a harmful lifestyle. What does that mean in practice? Put simply, there is not space for Nicholas to prance around in an Elsa costume and play with balloons to express the joy of knowing he would finally access gender affirming care. It means that Elke can perform pieces about oppression, that Matilda can speak to her experiences of horrific violence when she came out, that Violet can write plays about being rejected by loved ones from coming out – and that this work will likely be rewarded. I do not mean to say that this work, these forms of art, are not important or valuable pieces of queer and trans\* stories; on the contrary, these stories are undeniable parts of queer and trans\* histories, presents, and likely, many futures. But when they are the *only* stories, images, and representations of queerness that are circulated and available to other queer and trans\* people – and to heteronormative society – then we are losing something crucial.

When we do not make space for queer and trans joy, we cannot see Nicholas and his friends celebrating his medical transition, nor Violet's cast performing stories in which queerness is treated as commonplace and unremarkable facts of life. In a more intangible sense, when queer

joy cannot flourish, we lose the space to tell non-normative, inconvenient, and radical stories about queer lives. But we also lose tales of the everyday, mundane, unremarkable pieces of the daily lives of queer and trans people. We limit the ability to express core pieces of our humanity. Likewise, in losing stories about joy, love, and celebration, we lose more than just art – we lose entire histories when the record we preserve is only one of tragedy and pain. The end result of this is that we lose visible examples and possibilities for what queer and trans lives can and do look like.

Moreover, it constitutes a larger form of representational incoherence. By this, I mean that these dominant narratives of queer suffering and trauma can only exist if actual queer histories are actively distorted, erased through these constructed absences, and misrepresented. That distortion creates a further kind of incoherence for my interlocutors, one that almost takes the form of gaslighting – they are able to see that something is missing, to say “I see you are not there” (Gordon 2008, 16), to know that pieces of their community might fall away into the digital ether at any moment without leaving any tangible trace or proof that these erasures have really happened. How do you combat that kind of purposeful (mis)representation when your own image might vanish mid-stream? When you cannot speak in the public sphere without immense threat and precarity?

I have outlined throughout this dissertation the style in which the Toronto queer community has been imagined by cis/heteronormative white settler Canadian society: as always already wounded. My concern throughout has been with the potential realities that this imageworld of queerness and transness comes to (re)produce and to actualize. My interlocutors resist these dominant narratives of queerness and their realization for a variety of reasons that are situated within their own individual and community-wide political and ideological frameworks.

At the center of those complex political worldviews, though, is the concern with care – or, the sustaining of physical and social queer life. But you cannot sustain queer life if you're made invisible and policed out of existence. Likewise, you cannot sustain queer life if queer bodies can only exist as suffering subjects. The potentialities of queer life can be and are limited through these narratives and imageworlds of queer life; corporeal incoherence is one aspect of this, but even this is part of a larger problem that I'll term representational incoherence. It is not simply the fact that images of queer people living well in queer bodies are obfuscated; it is more than just not seeing certain imagery or certain representations of queerness being circulated, though that is certainly part of it. A community can be represented, overrepresented, or hypervisible without ever being shown evidence of the possibility of living well or without ever appearing as fully human to the dominant group. We cannot understand the interplays of invisibility, hypervisibility, and incoherence in a vacuum; we must understand it in relation to absence, to haunting as a particular way of knowing and carrying queer stories and histories which have been systematically erased, and to refusal as a way of knowing and actualizing queer futures.

Let me now pose the inverse question: what is at stake when we center queer joy? I have argued that centering queer joy is contingent on a refusal to center trauma narratives, which in turn makes room for new possibilities, imaginings, and futurities. In practice, that might look like a variety of practices. Bini's dream of creating their own servers and platforms to host queer art and activism that is not deemed to be socially acceptable or appropriate, and of utilizing these tools to also support and uplift sex workers and other marginalized communities, is one manifestation of refusal resulting in new possibilities outside of the already permissible. That possibility looks very different from the queer futurities that Violet imagines, namely ones in which showing up queer is so commonplace and normalized that it becomes unremarkable. We

can also look to Liese's efforts as a producer to constantly work towards "bigging up" or empowering other queer artists to produce their best work through removing the technical and financial barriers that constrain them. What Liese is imagining is a queer future in which queer artists are celebrated and supported and their art is able to reach new audiences. All of these imaginings make space, in their own respective ways, to imagine new and emergent possibilities.

Following that through to its logical conclusion, when we *can* suddenly see new possibilities for how we might live as queer and trans\* people through seeing other people experience and express them, they become pursuable and possible futures. Art that centers queer joy, then, has a liberatory or emancipatory element – intentional or not – because it has the power to birth new possible queer futures for its viewers or audiences. This is certainly not a new idea per se, nor is it new to queer art of past decades. If we look to past iterators of popular media that have centered queer fantasy, joy, and camp in a time that was equally if not more unfriendly to queer and trans\* communities, we can trace a legacy of queer media – though mostly at a larger scale – centering the idea of surrendering to outrageous fantasy and ambition (i.e. the oeuvre of John Waters, the Rocky Horror Picture Show, etc.). What is new is the potential for small and new media to also take up this mantle whilst building localized communities of care around their work. While the reach of small queer media is not remotely the same as the classic staples of queer popular culture, performances like Nicholas's Elsa balloon stunt emerge from the same desire to rose tint the world, albeit for an audience of thirty.

These images of queer and trans\* joy – and more broadly of living joyfully in transgressive bodies – had a visible effect on the audiences that consumed them throughout my fieldwork. Those images served as visual evidence of other queer and trans\* people living well in their own unique manifestations of a "good life". They evoked celebratory and affirming

responses from an audience of queer peers. They further created logs, data, metadata, memories, and testimonials of sharing and affirmation that cannot be erased from the minds of those who witnessed them, even if they are no longer visible on those platforms. They evoked alternate stories of queer life that were rich, complex, and contradictory – while not all of the effects were intended, they constitute a political project born of a reaction to the dissolution of physical community and the imposing of silence, absence, and erasure onto digital communities.

Centering queer joy can also serve to record alternate histories of queerness and transness during the pandemic, much in the same way that Sara Ahmed (2021) records complaints as a means of recording alternate and feminist histories of academic institutions. While the pandemic was (and its aftermath will surely remain) a time of increased anti-trans\* and wider anti-queer violence which has been well-documented by many, it was also a time full of hope and joy and that is an equally important history to record. Coming back to Violet's words, it is not the content of a piece that confers a politics onto it; rather, telling stories about queer and trans\* truths is political because it is an act of recording new or alternate histories of marginalized lives outside of hegemonic narratives of what those lives ought to be. This harkens to Sara Ahmed's (2021) theorization of complaint as a mode of recording alternate histories of institutions – that is, when we collect and hold space for marginalized peoples' truths about a time, space, or place, new narratives of what happened there will emerge and likely diverge from recognized and official histories. In this case, those truths are that queer life is good. It is enjoyable and loving – not only does being queer not preclude happiness and living well or invite doom, but living in queerly and carefully constructed spaces can birth and grow emancipatory queer potentials and futures that are not rooted in trauma narratives or the so-called “death drive”.

## Conclusion

What Billie does looks quite different from what The Underground and the Monarchs do. The Underground and the Monarchs are refusing to engage or (re)produce the social, spatial, and economic relationships that relegate them to the suffering slot, as well as refusing to reproduce dominant narratives and representations of queer and trans\* life, which I have already argued constitutes a care tactic, in which these artists intentionally center healing in their creative processes. What Billie is doing is also a care tactic; they are making space to sustain queer life through nurturing soft, safe spaces for queer art and connection, a place they described as being about “platonic queer intimacies”. Likewise, attempts across the community to share resources, to raise money, to connect people with particular skills with those who lacked them – all of these efforts constituted care tactics that were concerned with sustaining queer life, which ultimately enabled my interlocutors to continue to make space and art that centers queer and trans\* joy. Coming back to the notion of communities of care being assemblages of actors with differing motivations, commitments, positionalities, and relational stances, one can see how every actor in this community of care was not necessarily aligned on everything, or engaging in the same kind of work, or even in agreement on what the work ought to be. But ultimately, these varied care tactics are employed towards the same end of making a space built on foundations of care; a refusal of dominant modes of being, knowing, and doing; and a radical turn towards and embrace of queer and trans\* joy. Ultimately, it is these care tactics that make space for centering joy.

## **Chapter 8 – Conclusion**

In this dissertation, I have sought to position digital queer performance during the pandemic in a contextualized, nuanced, and complex politics and history of queer performance, the Toronto queer performance scene, and the online platforms in play. In doing so, I have teased out a key tension between the accessibility of digital performance and the structural violence of this time for queer and trans people. I have argued that while the shift to digital spaces was a necessary response to the state of exception of the pandemic – and, as explored in chapters three, four, and five, rendered live performance more accessible to some – the political conditions of this time also rendered these digital spaces increasingly hostile to visibly queer and trans people. That is to say, I have argued that the platforms that have enabled the formation and maintenance of virtual communities for some can also manifestly rob others of that ability. My interlocutors felt that contradiction but nonetheless pushed against the structural constraints of platforms like Twitch to build community and “take up space” in places that did not want to welcome them and were not built for them. I have situated this in a wider tradition of queer performance practices and performance art which, following from Hill (2000), I argue emerge from the necessity to carve out a space for the existence of marginalized communities.

In tracing the shifts in my interlocutors’ uses of digital technologies, platforms, and artistic mediums, this dissertation also illuminated distinctive shifts in how my interlocutors thought about community, performance, spacemaking, safety, care, and joy. In the initial weeks and months of the pandemic, my interlocutors understood digital performance as a necessary adaptation that would bridge pandemic restrictions on physical gatherings, and which would help sustain the wellbeing of the community. As the pandemic wore on, my interlocutors began rethinking digital performance, coming to see it as a long-term project that needed to be rendered sustainable for their own wellbeing, and as a critical space for creating and maintaining queer

communities of care. In chapter three, I examined how space and place are made and experienced online, arguing that my interlocutors engaged in and understood spacemaking and community-building in hostile digital environments as both political tactics and radical acts of care. In chapter four, I expounded upon the complexities of spacemaking and care in respect to the accessibility, or lack thereof, of digital spaces for different sub-groups within the queer community. In chapter five, I further complicated the idea of access and spacemaking by examining the policing and erasure of representations of queerness and transness in digital spaces, arguing that moderation and “adult content bans” have been increasingly weaponized to target and harass queer, trans, and racialized users on these platforms, effectively erasing and excluding queer users and stories. My arguments around erasure and representation help to contextualize and situate the larger framing of my interlocutors’ use of care tactics and their efforts to build communities of care in the face of disenfranchisement, violence, a global pandemic, and rising anti-queer and anti-trans politics.

In chapters six and seven, I explore the storytelling choices my interlocutors have made to refuse trauma narratives and dominant logics about queer life, and the move towards centering queer joy in the art. I argue that these choices constitute a refusal of heteronormative framings of queerness which center pain and injury and bring forth new potentialities and worlding processes. Returning to Gonzales-Day (2006), I argue that refusal is a mode of representation in and of itself. Moreover, it is ultimately generative rather than inherently prohibitive in the lines of inquiry it enables. In this dissertation, I have argued that my interlocutors’ refusal to reproduce images and stories of queer trauma and to instead give voice to a wider spectrum of human experiences that capture and represent queer and trans\* people living full, complete, loving, and joyful lives was a deliberate and generative choice. Further, I have argued that the act of refusal

and the choice to then center queer joy was inextricable from my interlocutors' understandings of their relationships and responsibilities to community and to take care of one another in this time of crisis. Ultimately, through this artistic refusal, my interlocutors began to reimagine how their commitments to community and care might manifest in digital spaces.

Taken all together, I have ultimately argued that my interlocutors' performance practices – from the centering of joy and refusal of trauma narratives to their efforts to make space and maintain the life of the community through performance – should be read as efforts to build and maintain safe community-oriented digital performances and community spaces. I also contend that these efforts were political, and often strategic, acts that my interlocutors understood explicitly as acts of care and which I argue make up the assemblages I theorize to be communities of care. I contend that the artistic choices my interlocutors made, paired with the spacemaking practices they employed, constitute care tactics, which in turn enabled them to build deeply queer, multimodal communities of care around performances of queer joy.

#### A Note on the Future of Digital Performance

Just before I left the field, I went back to my interlocutors to ask them one last set of follow-up questions: Where do we go from here? What becomes of digital queer performance and the spaces and communities built up around it as “return to normal” is on the horizon? The answers were not simple – my interlocutors' relationships to digital performance had evolved so much over the course of the pandemic, mirroring so much of how all of our relationships to hybridity and the digital changed in that time. It would be disingenuous not to acknowledge how much burnout and disenchantment had permeated the spaces my interlocutors built – because building them had been such an undue amount of labour placed on them in a time that was already fraught.

The ways my interlocutors understood digital performance evolved over time. In the beginning of the pandemic, digital performance was almost a stopgap measure meant to hold the community over for a few weeks of public health restrictions. Then, as the pandemic dragged on, it became about creating stable digital queer community, (re)building livelihoods, creating mutual support networks, and building communities of care in order to sustain queer life in the social and physical sense. That need to stabilize led my interlocutors on a path across multiple pre-existing platforms, all of which were imperfect to meet their needs in varying ways. In the beginning, my interlocutors talked about queer digital performance in hopeful terms. As I was finishing my fieldwork in early 2022, however, those views evolved. For many of my interlocutors, digital performance had never become sustainable in the long-term and the burn out they felt was palpable. Nevertheless, there was still an acknowledgement – even from the most disenfranchised with the whole endeavour – that what they had built was important, meaningful, and radical.

Liese articulated one vision for the future of digital drag that I keep returning to:

“I’m really confident that this niche has been created and it won’t go away unless everyone stops collectively. If one person is doing digital drag, others will find it. And someone will fill that gap if they stop. It will go on...even if the digital drive post-pandemic changes the way that drag performers have started to create and load content onto the internet, it will continue in some form”.

Is the party over? Objectively, no. But it is a very different scene than it was in 2020, 2021, or even 2022. The concepts of multimodal or digital performance did not spring in being in 2020, but the particular iterations and the surrounding communities, networks, and livelihoods my interlocutors built up around them were certainly a response to the specific circumstances of the pandemic. Digital performance was not easy work, but it was necessary work – and so my interlocutors, their collaborators, and their communities trudged onwards. As this dissertation has

shown, this work was punctuated by unadulterated queer joy. But it was also as consistently a time of burn out, dismay, and constant re-strategizing in order to sustain queer digital life and community. The exhaustion of this time cannot be understated and needs to be as equally acknowledged as the benefits of queer community building and transgressiveness of queer and trans joy. As existing online became more and more necessary over the course of the pandemic, existing online while queer became more and more difficult. It truly was the best of times – beautiful, joyful, radically transgressive – and the worst of times – a tremendous amount of labour for very little compensation and severely mentally taxing and often psychologically unsafe. There is only so much of the latter that most people can withstand.

Now that digital queer performance is no longer the only artistic outlet and that digital queer community is not as necessary to those fortunate enough to have access to physical queer spaces, the queer performance scene in Toronto looks different. Is it different solely because the world has largely moved on from the pandemic? No, but that is certainly a contributing factor. But so too was the growing hostility of digital spaces to queer and trans\* people. I hold that a number of contributing factors have led us to the current state of the scene, including the ability to return to in-person spaces; the lived realities of years of economic precarity and the burn out of producing digital performance; the constant struggle of online life for queer people on these platforms, including the harassment and anti-queer and anti-trans violence and erasure; and the loss of stability that followed from being routinely pushed off these platforms.

In this dissertation, I have argued that we should think about digital queer performance as something that emerged not as a chosen path, but as the only form of performance my interlocutors and their audiences had access to during the pandemic. Moreover, I have argued that it should be understood, in the vein of Hill (2000), as an art form that emerged from a

community that was largely accustomed to being excluded from institutional spaces and had a predisposition for carving out their own space. I have also demonstrated how digital queer performance was a response to a crisis – a crisis that was financial, communal, and social in nature. Digital platforms enabled my interlocutors to build communities of care in a time where access to community was extremely limited; it enabled them to (re)build new paths and networks in an archipelagic formation of disjointed queer corners of the internet in a time when going to the gayborhood was not possible. It enabled a new flow of money, care, and support between audiences and performers alike. But keeping those paths and networks safe and intact was difficult. The convergence of growing anti-trans and anti-queer hate and online life during the pandemic bred a new incarnation of homophobic and transphobic tactics and harassment. And it bred new forms of violence, enacted through terms and conditions and algorithms. Ultimately, we have to understand this as a temporally and spatially specific phenomenon. Both the good – the queer joy, the communities of care, the freedom and new forms of art and community – and the bad – the violence, the harassment, the erasure – were born of a very specific set of circumstances.

The specificity of those circumstances does not mean that digital queer performance and these online communities cannot exist after the pandemic. The other side of that coin – online hate – certainly has not gone away. But the return to in-person gatherings does necessarily shift the needs being served by queer online life. The immediate needs that drove how my interlocutors organized themselves online during the pandemic – to build communities of care, livelihoods, and mutual aid and support networks – can now be met in-person again, in spaces that are more easily controlled for safety, in interactions that are less emotionally exhausting, and in performances that feel more immediately energizing (and which may be more consistently

compensated). In 2023, the landscape of queer digital performance on these platforms looks very different than it did in 2020-2021; now, we see a smattering of multimodal art and performance, some continued streaming, but mostly a shift back to in-person live performance that is accompanied by recorded snippets ending up online. Some artists, like Matilda, have continued livestreaming; the unique style she developed during the pandemic of layering filters on a live camera feed to create visual and audio distortion or affect cannot be easily recreated on the stage of a gay bar. Others have maintained a digital streaming presence but have scaled down the amount of streaming and the time, effort, and production value that goes into streaming. Ultimately, digital queer performance still exists, but it has once again adapted and evolved in line with changing circumstances offline.

I, for one, cannot blame my interlocutors for wanting to return to in-person venues. While this dissertation has been full of examples of queer and trans joy, community building, and love and support, all of this has been underlined by isolation, burn out, lack of funds, exhaustion, and a lack of return on the energy and emotional investments that performers put into digital performance. The digital performance model of 2020 was never sustainable; nor was it intended to be. It was an urgent and emergent response to unprecedented circumstances that were only meant to last a few weeks.

What I am hopeful will emerge when the dust settles in the coming years and the most immediate impacts of the pandemic begin to fade is that the desire for multimodality in queer performance, as well as the desire to render queer performance more accessible by integrating live streams or other virtual participation methods into in-person venues, find their footing. As I began writing this dissertation in early 2022, I found myself going back to interlocutors to ask retrospective questions about their online journeys; many indicated that they felt they needed a

long break from digital life but that they were still contemplating if and how they would integrate aspects of digital life into their future work. Elsie, for example, was certain about multimodality, that it would be the future of her approach to live in-person theatre, but she just wasn't quite sure how that would work yet. And so, this story is not yet finished. The legacy of queer digital performance during the pandemic remains unwritten and will continue to unravel and weave itself into the fabric of the Toronto queer performance scene for years to come.

### Contributions to the Literature

In building on hooks (1995) and Hill (2000), this dissertation contributes to a multidisciplinary literature of performance by theorizing queer performance as carving out space for existence and survival, while simultaneously offering a potentially liberatory space to (re)make new queer potentialities. This dissertation also builds on the work of Ginsburg (1993, 1997) and Marcus (1996), extending the concepts of cultural activism and the activist imaginary to theorize how marginalized communities use, repurpose, and build public and private digital performance spaces as inherently politicized – and sometimes political work – and as potentially emancipatory projects built upon platforms that were not built for their use.

Crucially, this dissertation contributes to the anthropology of performance and the anthropology of care by theorizing performance practices as care. In thinking about care and performance as both implicitly and explicitly political acts, I extend De Certeau's (1984) conceptualization of tactics in order to frame the artistic choices and care practices my interlocutors employed as tactics. I have argued that my interlocutors understood their acts of refusal and performance practices to be inseparable from how they understood providing care. In conceptualizing care as a range of social, semiotic, and performative practices aimed at sustaining the social existence of a community, I understand my interlocutors' acts of refusal as

intentional acts to sustain the community's life. This dissertation therefore theorizes these attempts to undermine dominant power structures through the intentional practice of spacemaking to be what I term care tactics. Moreover, this dissertation contributes to the anthropology of care in framing my interlocutors' intentional refusal of trauma narratives as care. In refusing to reproduce damage-centered narratives and in building deliberate and intentional spaces that center queer joy, my interlocutors have built queer communities of care in which the social existence of the community is maintained by a reprieve from dominant narratives about queer and trans trauma, abjection, and despair.

Finally, this dissertation contributes to the queer anthropology in its centering of queer joy. The anthropological and queer theory literature has relied on the "queer death drive" as a dominant analytical lens for framing queer life. While theorists like Munoz (2009) have sought to unseat that, the imagining of queer tragedy continues to haunt the literature. Within this context, a rejection of that framing is a departure. Additionally, moving to centering queer joy as the predominant analytical lens through which to make sense of and theorize queer life is not only a novel contribution to queer anthropology, but, as I have argued in this dissertation, also makes room for new possibilities, imaginings, and futurities to emerge from that space of queer joy.

### Areas for Future Research

This research was specific to the context of the pandemic and the need for digital spaces it created. It is unlikely – though not impossible – that these conditions reproduce themselves to enable the same kind of digital ethnographic engagement in these spaces. However, the methods used here – and particularly the arts-based methods – can and should be extended and built upon in future digital ethnographic research. The multi-sitedness of this research was also an

innovation in digital ethnography, which has predominantly been focused around singular platforms or spaces. Following the movements of humans across digital space rather than letting the confines of a particular digital field set the parameters for fieldwork is an approach to non-digital-centric ethnography that merits further research and engagement.

Moreover, my conclusions about digital performance are the product of the particular space-time of the pandemic in which my interlocutors lived. My conclusions are informed by their journeys from 2020 to 2022. In time, if and when the dust has settled, my interlocutors may retrospectively and reflexively develop new understandings and framings of what the era of digital queer performance meant for them. Future ethnographic research which builds upon my attempts to trace the evolution of digital performance in this time may provide additional or more nuanced insights.

Finally, there is a clear need for additional research on the phenomena identified in this dissertation related to queer and trans visibility online. As moral panics and explicitly and openly transphobic and homophobic political ideologies become increasingly mainstream – and indeed, their proponents assume power throughout western democracies – it is prescient and necessary to further examine how digital spaces, algorithms, self-censorship, and community and self policing contribute to and reproduce the very dominant narratives of queer abjection this dissertation elucidates. While some research into the effects of these phenomena in digital space and their ripples into the physical world exists in the multidisciplinary literature, I posit that the shifting political landscapes in which queer and trans people find themselves will likely necessitate further research and, indeed, ethnographic accounting of its impacts on these communities.

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