THE QUEER SOUNDS OF TIKTOK

Ellen Messner

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate College of Bowling Green
State University in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF MUSIC

August 2022

Committee:

Katherine Meizel, Committee Chair

Sidra Lawrence

Heather Strohschein

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ABSTRACT

Katherine Meizel, Committee Chair

This thesis is an exploration of the sounds of the queer side of TikTok. TikTok is a social media platform, driven by user-generated audio-visual content that is delivered through the "For You" page's individually curated algorithm. As such, TikTok is uniquely situated as a social media network that inadvertently creates online communities situated around not only common interests but the trends and sounds that accompany them. Within TikTok's queer community, sounds present avenues for exploring and performing gendered and sexual identities as well as developing preexisting queer-coded communications. These sounds also serve as opportunities to raise issues of gender identity, race, and inclusivity within the LGBTQ+ community. This work is centered on case studies of TikTok sounds and their accompanying trends, each supporting a critical analysis of queer TikTok spaces as indicative of a need for intersectionality within the queer community.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, I want to express the gratitude I have for my advisor, Dr. Meizel, whose guidance in this research process has been invaluable. Thank you for the hours spent reading over my writing, providing me with resources, and dealing with my more bothersome habits. I could not have gotten this far, nor kept a relative sense of composure throughout this process, without your encouragement and reassurances.

A special thanks to Drs. Lawrence and Strohschein, my committee members. The time and work you have dedicated for my benefit is deeply appreciated.

To my family, my mom and dad, who have always been my greatest supporters: thank you for the music lessons, the late nights helping me with my school projects, for believing that I can achieve my goals. To my brother, his fiancée, and their beautiful children: you all light up my life. Thank you for being a great source of joy amidst years of grueling work.

Finally, I want to especially thank my partner and future husband, Doug, whose support has been crucial to the completion of this work. Thank you for being by my side on my most difficult days, for caring for us and our beloved cats when school and work have exhausted me. Your help as my proof-reader, my sounding board, and the audience to my rantings and ravings has been invaluable. I have cherished the so-called little things, how you help me find the words that are on the tip of my tongue, or how cups of water, coffee, and tea suddenly appear on my desk. For all of this and more, thank you, dear.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

LIST OF FIGURES

CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION

This thesis is an exploration of the sounds of the queer[1] side[2] of TikTok. TikTok is a social media platform, driven by the production and circulation of user-generated audio-visual content. This content is processed and delivered to audiences through the platform's algorithm, creating communities united around common interests. However, these communities are not only united through common interests, but by sounds and the trends that accompany them. Within TikTok's queer community, sounds present an avenue for exploring and performing gender and sexual identities as well as continuing a history of communication through queer-coded signifiers. These sounds also provide entry points into current discourse pertaining to gender identity, race, and inclusivity within the LGBTQ+ community. Through the analysis of case studies, this thesis uses TikTok sounds as a critical framework that investigates negotiations of space, race, and queer identity.

In this work, the term "sound" embraces multiple meanings, drawing from TikTok itself as well as ethnomusicology and sound studies to frame an understanding of sound around space and sociality. TikTok uses the term "sound" to refer to the audio component of TikTok videos. This includes music and non-music sounds, originating from personal recordings as well as borrowing from other media sources. On TikTok, sounds function as digital sonic objects that

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[1] "Queer" is a formerly derogatory term, reclaimed by the LGBTQ+ community, that generally encompasses all non-straight and/or non-cisgender identities. Those who identify as queer also often have gender or sexual identities that challenge and do not fit within conventional frameworks limited to binary concepts of male and female, heterosexual and homosexual. In my work, I use the term "queer" as inclusive of this category of people who exist in the borders of gender and sexual identities. See also Butler, Judith, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*. New York: Routledge, 1993, and Ahmed, Sara, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2006.

[2] The term "sides" is used to refer to communities on TikTok, often invoking a specific category or aesthetic quality of TikTok video content. See Wylde, Kaitlyn, "13 Sides of TikTok Beyond Dancing," *Bustle,* September 3, 2020, https://www.bustle.com/life/sides-of-tiktok.

users can create, borrow, and use in their video content, sometimes resulting in the development of social media trends. The application of sounds within TikTok are directly related to the communities in which they are used, invoking a broader understanding of sound as it relates to social and spatial environments.

Peter Wicke places sound within the context of popular culture studies, using music as an example of a sound functioning within a cultural framework. In doing so, he defines sound beyond the definition of "acoustic matter":

> "The function of acoustic material as sound is neither given nor fixed. The acoustic material in its physicality as measurable sound pressure does not function in the music simply as sound; it is instead drawn into a culturally defined reference system…via music making, the process of intentional sound generation" (2016, 25).

Within TikTok communities, sounds and their applications hold a significance that necessitates an understanding of sound that encompasses the contexts in which it exists.

Though ethnomusicology was initially conceived to pursue a study of music in non-Western cultures, it has since evolved in part to accommodate a broader understanding of music as sound. In his critical attempt to define ethnomusicology, George List engages with the history of ethnomusicology as it has evolved to accommodate broadening understandings of music and culture. The definition that List produces names ethnomusicology as "the study of humanly produced patterns of sound, sound patterns that the members of culture who produce them or the scholar who studies them conceive to be music" (1979, 1). Though ethnomusicology remains a delineation of music studies, List's definition of ethnomusicology blurs the lines between music and sound in such a way that illuminates a clear approach of studying sound using ethnomusicological methods.

Like ethnomusicology, sound studies is an area of study that is broad in its interdisciplinary approach to the study of sound. Jonathan Sterne's chapter, "Sonic Imaginations" in *The Sound Studies Reader* defines sound studies as "the interdisciplinary ferment in the human sciences that takes sound and the discourses and institutions that describe them, it describes what sound does in the human world, and what humans do in the sonic world" (2012, 2). Sterne also asserts that while sound studies is a result from the metamorphosing of social disciplines over time, it is also an "intellectual reaction to changes in culture and technology" (2012, 3). As a topic within sound studies, technology is acknowledged as a key contributor to changes in culture and sound.

Within the realm of sound studies, scholars have explored sound and its relationship to digital spaces. The editors of the book *Digital Sound Studies* (Mary Caton Lingold, Darren Mueller, and Whitney Trettien) assert the importance of sound studies in the digital humanities in understanding the role of sound within digital spaces.[3] In their introduction, the editors acknowledge the importance of digital sound studies in current scholarship, saying, "Studying sound in the second decade of the twenty-first century demands that researchers pay critical attention to technologies, and especially to their invisibilities and silences" (2018, 4).

Though ethnomusicology and sound studies are ambiguous in their definitions, they each embrace an aspect of sound within social spaces and frameworks. As previously mentioned, TikTok sounds have particular abilities and functions on the TikTok app. Within the context of online communities, TikTok sounds can be investigated as digital sonic objects as well as dimensions of human activity and technological production through the research methods applied in ethnomusicology and sound studies.

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[3] Mary Caton Lingold, Darren Mueller, and Whitney Anne Trettien, *Digital Sound Studies*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), viii.

This work is centered on case studies of U.S.-centered TikTok sounds and their accompanying trends, each demonstrating different utilizations of sounds to create and express queer experiences. I investigate several case studies using not only information gathered from TikTok video captions, comments and responses, but also through external sources such as news media, published interviews, opinion pieces and an ethnographic interview I conducted with a TikTok user.

The case studies discussed in this work are primarily framed using scholarship that addresses the intersections of gender, sexuality and race. The construction of gender and sexuality in popular culture, media, and the internet has been well established in gender and sexuality studies, building on Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, in which gender is construction through acts that are "both intentional and performative, where 'performative' suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning" (2006, 190). Throughout this work, I suggest that TikTok videos are performances in which performative gestures of gender and sexual identity are carried out within the context of social media trends. There is also existing ethnographic literature that addresses the "queering" of digital space, such as Lisa Henderson's "Still Queer --- Or, What Is Queer Internet Studies for Those Who don't Study the Internet?" which asserts that the queer internet is a "cultural formation, not a technological outcome."[4] Additionally, *No Tea, No Shade* contains essays from Black queer scholars who address the issues of Blackness, queerness, and space, both physical and virtual.

Though each field of study offers extensive theorization that informs the understanding of identity, performance, performativity, space, and sound in both our physical and virtual worlds, there is a lack of research addressing how these theories may be applied specifically to the use of

[4] Henderson, Lisa. "Still Queer --- Or, what is Queer Internet Studies for those Who Don't Study the Internet?" *First Monday* 23, no. 7. 2018. https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v23i7.9270.

sound in current social media. As of April 2022, TikTok is nearly six years old, a time during which an immeasurable amount of content has been created and shared. These countless moments that occur online are fleeting, yet build collective experiences shared by countless online communities. Contextualizing these snapshots of life within critical theory will help to demystify the position of social media within everyday life.

As a white, queer TikTok user and ethnographer, my work includes moments where I expand upon my own experiences and relationship to the subject of online queer identities and communities. Since downloading TikTok in spring of 2020, I have published only a few videos of my own, and watch TikTok videos on a near-daily basis. After two years of engaging with the TikTok app, I have been comfortably situated within "gay" or queer TikTok.

Though my "For You" page is curated to my personal interests and identities, I have been able to explore trends that have transpired on my video feed in greater depth by seeking out videos under sounds and hashtags. However, I am not always positioned as an insider within TikTok's queer spaces. As I scroll through my For You page, I alternate between insider and outsider; watching and engaging with content that, though it is on my algorithmically curated video feed, may not be *for* me. This was the case when I discovered the sound "blk and ga", a sound I discovered on my For You page because I follow @bobthedragqueen, who originated the accompanying trend with hand gestures.[5] In watching the videos that use the "blk and ga" sound, which was specifically created to be used by Black and gay TikTokers, I entered into a virtual space in which I was an outsider. Though I was unsuccessful in cultivating a relationship with a collaborator that could specifically speak upon these spaces, I consult the works of Black queer

[5] See page 46.

scholars to underline the messages delivered through sounds like “blk and ga” and to contextualize them within calls for intersectionality within the LGBTQ+ community at large.

Liz Przybylski’s *Hybrid Ethnography: Online, Offline, and In Between* approaches the fieldsite of online ethnographic research as one that accounts for “the conception of space and the related positioning in time, the delimitation of the material of research, and the way individuals and groups are implicated all shift in qualitative ways” (2021, 6). Przybylski also offers a guide to examining the researcher’s unique position of power as it pertains to online ethnography. Though fieldwork conducted online does not necessitate a physical presence within a scene or community, the researcher’s position and identity online impacts the dynamics between the researcher and the potential collaborator nonetheless. As Pryzbylski states, “Power is attributed to differential identity characteristics in social scenes. Critical ethnographic work requires analyzing one’s own position as well as probing the power dynamics of the ethnographic scene” (2021, 34).

In my efforts to connect with individuals on TikTok to schedule interviews for my research, my privileged position as a white researcher was made plain. In an email exchange with a queer person of color on TikTok, I was asked to provide information about what, if any, racial lens I was using to approach my work with as well as my own racial background. These inquiries challenged me. I struggled to withhold the urge to provide reassurances, to convince them that I was doing everything “right”. In my multiple attempts to draft my responses, I realized that it was impossible to ignore the fact that I was requesting not only information, but labor from a racially marginalized individual for the purposes of benefitting myself as I had nothing of immediate benefit to offer in return. After sending them the information they requested, I never heard from them again. Though this was not the only rejection I experienced

in my efforts to establish contacts, this brief exchange lingered in my mind throughout the remainder of my research process.

This experience has prompted me to confront my whiteness, to sit in the discomfort of the situation of my own making. In interrogating my positionality and the ethics of my research, I have relied on the reflexive methods proposed by Przybylski, which emphasizes that "it is imperative to recognize how your situated position and those of your fellow participants impact perception in your scene" (2021, 29).

Though public discourse about TikTok often dismisses its significance, this work strives to establish TikTok as a legitimate site of study. A piece published in *Gay Times* notes that "Too often TikTok is written off and reduced to nothing more than an app for cringeworthy frat boys to debut their dance moves, but this platform has evolved into so much more. Now, TikTok has transformed into a place of education and self-discovery helping to reclaim the queer experience online".[6] As a gathering place for the global queer community, TikTok is a space that hosts queer experiences as well as discussions of identity, performance, community, and inclusivity.

It is also important to note that TikTok is not only significant because of its capacity as a virtual space, but also because of its position within recent history. The recent burgeoning of TikTok as a prominent—perhaps *the* prominent—social media platform is deeply intertwined with the timeline of the COVID-19 pandemic. The events that have transpired since the declaration of a global pandemic by the World Health Organization on March 11, 2020 have pushed virtual spaces to the forefront of daily lived experiences, making TikTok a means of social connection within a period of prolonged isolation and deep uncertainty. In recent years,

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[6] Raza-Sheikh, Zoya, "It's here and queer: how TikTok became the Gen Z tool of LGBTQ+ education," *Gay Times*, October 23, 2020, https://www.gaytimes.co.uk/originals/its-here-and-queer-how-tiktok-became-the-gen-z-tool-of-lgbtq-education/.

social media has not only become an area of study in multiple disciplines—including ethnomusicology—but it also is an essential space for ethnographic research. And since 2020, ethnography in virtual spaces has become increasingly relevant. The events of the past two years have established digital ethnography not just as a constantly growing avenue of research, but as a method that follows where life has led us: online.

My online ethnographic work involves a case study analysis of TikTok trends that are indicative of not only the queer community, but Black queer community. I have contextualized this analysis in literature by Black queer scholars that address the lack of accommodating spaces that is fueled by a white-centered conceptualization of queerness. It is my intention to highlight these examples in order to echo the impactful work initiated and perpetuated by Black queer scholars and visionaries to deconstruct and redefine queer spaces. By understanding the virtual spaces created by and for the Black queer community on TikTok, we can develop a deeper understanding of the nature of these spaces and their capacity to hold space for communities of identities that elude complete definition.

My aim for this thesis is not to present a complete, totalizing work, but a piece of a representable truth that has potential for inquiry and discussion. It is my hope that this research operates like a TikTok; that the information presented here not only builds off of preexisting bodies of work, but that it offers opportunities for others to engage with the material presented. In invoking this spirit of collaboration, I draw upon the words of Audre Lorde, “And where the words of women are crying to be heard, we must each of us recognize our responsibility to seek those words out, to read them and share them and examine them in their pertinence to our lives. That we not hide behind mockeries of separations that have been imposed upon us and which so often we accept as our own” (1984, 43). The queer sounds of TikTok, as presented in this work,

present an opportunity to listen and reflect upon the negotiation of space in an unaccommodating world.

An Introduction to TikTok

Skai, what is TikTok?

ok, so, like, imagine Tumblr and YouTube have a kid. But then Tumblr and YouTube both Die! So that kid has to be raised by Twitter.

Okay???

Ok now imagine every angry person on the internet.

[...]

[...]

Is- Is that All???

Some of them dance.

I've heard that's all it is, is dancing.

The dancers don't know about everyone else.

Oh…(badjershark, "POV: you see someone ask me what TikTok is")[7]

TikTok is a social media platform[8] used for creating and sharing short videos that range between three seconds to three minutes in length[9]. Compared to the social media giants that

[7] Text is formatted to match the format of the video captions from the video creator. Italics are added for dialogue clarity by the author.

[8] The terms "platform," "network," and "application" are used throughout this work. While there is ambiguity surrounding the definition of each term, and they are often used interchangeably in various forms of literature, I refer to the definitions explored in the 2015 special issue of *Telecommunications Policy* which acknowledges the ways social media embodies each term: "application" as the digital medium of social media; "platform" as the space available to users to create profiles and generate content; and "network" as the online social community. Jonathan A. Obar, Steve Wildman, "Social media definition and the governance challenge: An introduction to the special issue," *Telecommunications Policy*, Volume 39, Issue 9, 2015, Pages 745-750, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.telpol.2015.07.014.

preceded it, TikTok is relatively young. TikTok was launched into the global arena of social media after the lip-syncing app Musical.ly was acquired by Beijing Bytedance Technology Co. in 2017 (Dow Jones Institutional News). Since that time, TikTok has amassed a large global audience, with one billion monthly active users in North America alone.[10]

TikTok displays videos vertically, filling up the entire phone screen. On TikTok's main page, the "For You" page, videos play automatically and are navigated by swiping up or down. Editing features on the TikTok app are free to every user, facilitating a playground of creative audiovisual output. However, TikTok's capacity and prominence as a social media network also establishes the platform as not just a host of audiovisual media, but a site of online culture and community. Through features on the TikTok platform, users are able to "engage with other users, through "response" videos or by means of "duets" — users can duplicate videos and add themselves alongside."[11] The often separate audio tracks added to TikTok videos, called "sounds"—including fragments of music, speech, movie dialogue, an automated voice reading text—are a crucial facet in TikTok's sociability, forging social connections with the click of a button. Sounds are shared and transferred from video to video, poster to poster in a practice reminiscent of reggae riddims or samples in hip hop. They can also originate from other sources, including a collection of music acquired by TikTok, and videos from other online platforms such as YouTube.

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[9] A statement from TikTok confirms the platform's intention to introduce videos as long as ten minutes for the purposes of monetization. See Andrew Hutchinson, "TikTok Confirms that 10 Minute Video Uploads are Coming to All Users," *Social Media Today,* February 28, 2022. https://www.socialmediatoday.com/news/tiktok-confirms-that-10-minute-video-uploads-are-coming-to-all-users/619535/

[10] "What's Next," *TikTok for Business*, January 28, 2022. https://ads.tiktok.com/business/creativecenter/whats_next.html.

[11] John Herrman, "How TikTok is Rewriting the World," *New York Times,* March 10, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/10/style/what-is-tik-tok.html.

John Herrman wrote about TikTok in a 2019 *New York Times* article, naming a particular experiential quality that distinguishes the platform from other platforms; the For You page:

> What's both crucial and easy to miss about TikTok is how it has stepped over the midpoint between the familiar self-directed feed and an experience based first on algorithmic observation and inference. The most obvious clue is right there when you open the app: the first thing you see isn't a feed of your friends, but a page called "For You." It's an algorithmic feed based on videos you've interacted with, or even just watched. It never runs out of material. It is not, unless you train it to be, full of people you know, or things you've explicitly told it you want to see. It's full of things that you seem to have demonstrated you want to watch, no matter what you actually say you want to watch. (Herrman, 2019)

The For You page is the focal point of engagement on TikTok, where users can infinitely scroll through an endless series of videos that are generated by the algorithm. The For You page is, in TikTok's words, a "recommendation system that delivers content to each user that is likely to be of interest to that particular user" (TikTok, 2020). Recommended videos that appear on an individual's For You page are determined by how the user engages with content–how many times they watch a video, if they "like" the video, write a comment, or share the video–and settings selected by the user upon downloading the app: language preferences, and the selection of topics of interest. As TikTok has stated, "Part of the magic of TikTok is that there's no one [single] For You feed" (TikTok 2020); each experience on TikTok is curated to the individual, connecting users to content that is specially "for them," and in turn feeding the algorithm with more data to generate your next experience.

This algorithmic curation centers the purpose and function of TikTok around the individual user's consumption of content. This contributes to a broader phenomenon on the For You page: the formation of online communities, or "sides," of TikTok. There are many different types of communities on TikTok, each centered around a topic, and each encompassing a wide variety of characteristics that are particular to themselves. These communities produce and share content that is unique to their own experiences. This content includes the medium of sound.

A blog post released by TikTok acknowledges the role of sound on its platform and explains its function and utilization for marketing content:

> Another determining factor in the content generated by the TikTok algorithm is sound. Sound is just as important as your visuals when it comes to creating videos. TikTok opens directly to a full-screen viewing experience with the For You feed. And it does so with the sound on. TikTok currently has an extensive library of songs and sounds to accompany your videos. You can also create your own sound that other users can add to their videos. Best practices include using sounds that match the vibe of your video, and consider timing your actions to match the beat of the sound you choose. (TikTok, "The Importance of Sounds")

By clicking on a spinning record icon in the corner of any video on the For You page, a user can not only use that video's sound in their own video, but also see all TikTok videos that use that particular sound. This feature makes the virality of sounds possible, connecting the function of the algorithm with established TikTok communities to create distinct community trends centered around a common sound.

Since the merging of Bytedance and Musical.ly and the global launch of TikTok in 2018, the platform has captured the attention of a global audience. This powerful position within the

public sphere can perhaps be best understood within the context of the 2020 global pandemic. The *New York Times* published an Op-Ed piece in June of 2020, a few short months after a global pandemic was declared, in which Shira Ovide, who writes the On Tech column for the *New York Times*, described what the platform provided in the midst of great, wide-spread anxiety:

> What's unusual about TikTok is that it's not another place to see what's happening. It's a distilled expression of how people are feeling. At its best, a TikTok video gives me a sense of someone's essence — and taken together, of our collective essence. TikTok feels familiar, but its soul is unlike that of other social media that came before it. It can be mindless fun, but it's also a force to pay attention to. TikTok is the first entertainment powerhouse born in and built for the smartphone age — and it might change everything. (Ovide 2020)

TikTok offered users an opportunity to both escape and engage with the outside world—a welcomed relief from reality, from news cycles and adjusting to life in quarantine, while still engaging with people and their experiences. As Ovide wrote, "TikTok doesn't necessarily show you the reality of the world. It's about expression, but it's not like anything we're used to" (Ovide 2020). In the early months of the pandemic, TikTok offered space for individuals to congregate, located between a harsh physical reality and a collectively mourning metaphysical sociality.

Like the Internet, TikTok is an entity that eludes complete understanding; it is as vast as it is complex, it is everywhere and nowhere, and it is forever evolving and expanding. It is a universe in and of itself. Trending video formats and memes come and go, spanning mere months, weeks, or days. Each attempt to define or explain TikTok, however, reveals partial

truths that lend a better understanding of sound, space, identity, and community in the context of online social media platforms. The following portions of this chapter will build a framework, based on theorizations of the relationships between cyberspace, identity, social relationships, and sound, through which case studies of TikTok's queer community can be understood; further establishing TikTok as a site for sonic expressions of identity and the creation of community.

Virtual Spaces, Virtual Sounds

TikTok has served me in filling the unfilled spaces of my time. I first downloaded the app on my phone shortly after the beginning of quarantine in the spring of 2020, when I found myself with an abundance of time that was previously spent living my "normal" pre-Coronavirus life.

I made my first TikTok video on May 22, 2020. I don't remember there being any particular reason for making it, and it is not associated with any trends that I can recall. It's just me and images of my morning, laying in bed, my gaze flickering between my phone's front facing camera and the image of myself on my screen. I lift myself out of bed. The video cuts away to a sequence of images documenting the preparation of my breakfast: my hand turning on the stovetop to heat the tea kettle, opening a box of assorted tea packets; the images of my toast with the crust burnt around the edges, steam faintly blowing out the kettle's spout, my mug filling with hot water. Then my face appears once again, peering over my mug of tea. I remember that I pretended to sip my drink, not wanting to wait to capture the image and also not wanting to scald my tongue.

I edited the video, added a filter that makes the shadows look a blueish gray and Brahms' Intermezzo Op. 117 No. 2 in B flat minor. I posted the video with the caption, "Woke up realizing I can do what I want on this app because no one will see it."

This video didn't gain me any internet fame, just as I predicted. It has a grand total of 45 views, and one "like." Regardless of what exactly I was thinking at the time, I find that I am content with the result. Every now and then, I return to it with curiosity to observe a ghost of myself, created in part to enjoy my anonymity and occupy my own piece of artificial space.

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As a social media application, TikTok is abstractly located between the "real" physical world and the imagined world of the internet; between tangible and intangible spaces. We can locate some of the physical aspects of the internet within our devices and our bodies. Our access to the internet is mediated through physical items that provide multiple mediums of experience: sight, sound, and touch. Beyond interaction with personal technological devices lies the internet; an invisible web of information that makes the existence of social media networks possible.

This ambiguous place is often called cyberspace. This term, as noted by Fulgencio Sánchez Vera, is "frequently used in the academic sphere as well as in the journalism world. Sometimes it is even used colloquially. But, what is it for real? What does it consist of? What is it made of and how is it generated? Is it still useful to describe some kind of reality? These are not trivial questions" (Sánchez Vera, 19).

The idea of cyberspace as a parallel world to our own, one that we can log on and off from, is, as Sánchez Vera points out, no longer relevant. Sánchez Vera defines cyberspace in technological terms as "the reality arising with the development of global communication networks" (24). There are three layered components that help describe the dimension of cyberspace that Sánchez Vera details: physical, logical, and social. While the physical and logical layers represent both the tangible and intangible aspects of hardware and software, the social represents "the participation of users, which in fact have a determining role: the

cyberspace would only persist as long as users are there involved in its creation (Sánchez Vera, 26). This final layer of cyberspace is critical, centering active participation as its sustaining life force.

Sánchez Vera also makes another essential observation—that cyberspace is "dissoluting" into the physical world—our environment is increasingly saturated with technology that keeps us connected to the internet. Sánchez Vera states: "Current society lives in a world in which citizens can be permanently online no matter their location, thanks to the new technology of smart devices. There is no longer need to choose Cyberspace or the "real world," thus, the idea of cyberspace as separate from the real world seems to collapse" (27). The aforementioned physical, logical, and social layers of Cyberspace are constantly, rapidly growing, which "increasingly couples the physical and virtual, resulting in a wider and deeper connection between Cyberspace and the real world, which consequently evolve more and more into a reflection of the other" (27).

What, then, does this make of social media networks? Nils Gustafsson defines social networks as a kind of "user-generated social media," characterized by the ability to "maintain off-line connections in an on-line environment," making online communication available "regardless of where they happen to be situated in time or place" (2010, 7). This ability not only fosters personal connections, but also encourages engagement with other forms of media which in turn connect the individual to a large, public audience.

In the early 2000s, ethnomusicologist René T.A. Lysloff conducted an ethnographic study of an online community centered around the subculture of mod music. Lysloff's work includes a descriptive conceptualization of the World Wide Web. The World Wide Web evokes the earliest era of the internet, often referred to as "Web 1.0," which later developed into "Web

2.0" in the early 2000's with the introduction of social media networks like MySpace and Facebook.[12] At the time of Lysloff's research, the internet was a place that he describes as "[a] huge ghost town because human presence there is rarely synchronized temporally and never spatially. I won't find another person on the Web, I'll only find the traces they left behind" (2003, 24). This notion highlights the absence of "real" human presence on the internet, to which he adds, "we might say that [social media community] Softcity is not really about contemporaneity but about commensurability; it's not that people are *sharing* virtual space but that they all have *access* to that space–and they do it each individually, alone" (2003, 24). In this sense, social media networks are defined by their ability to create both social connection and distance, while simultaneously emphasizing distance and lack of an "irl" ("in real life") connection.

Though Lysloff's "ghost town" adds a metaphorical understanding of the digital environment of online relationships and communities, it only partially accounts for the social media platforms that currently exist. The internet continues to be a superhighway of information that connects individuals across physical distances. But, contrary to the internet that Lysloff studied, the internet in 2022 no longer feels like an empty space. The prevalence of and access to multiple, portable technological devices, in addition to the development and popularization of social media networks, have created an internet that is teeming with life.

Those whom we encounter on social media may be "ghosts," as Lysloff described. However, these encounters are not devoid of life. Lysloff ultimately acknowledged this himself, concluding his ethnography of the online mod community by emphasizing the real human

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[12] See Graham Cormode and Balachander Krishnamurthy. "Key differences between Web 1.0 and Web 2.0." *First Monday,* 13, no. 6. June 2, 2008. https://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/download/2125/1972.

experiences and social connection: “Thus, it might be better to say that we are experiencing radically new forms of social interaction as a result of media technologies–but the quality of these social interactions, however mediated they might be, still depends on the embodied humans that give rise to them” (31). Media technologies, as Lysloff stated, not only provide new individual experiences, but a new way to create and engage in community.

Using these conceptualizations of cyberspace and the social media networks that exist within it, TikTok’s position in modern society can be located both individually and collectively. TikTok exists within the technological devices of the individual—in cell phones, laptops, tablets, smart watches. These devices operate as physical access points to TikTok’s website and the TikTok app, sites of social media communication. Social media platforms exist within physical objects that are often kept within close physical proximity to the body, lifting up the insubstantial veil between distinct physical and virtual worlds.

The hybridity of cyberspace allows for the fostering of social relationships, online and off. This space is also a site for sound. John Connell and Chris Gibson’s book *Sound Tracks* discusses the inextricable relationship between space and sound (or, in their work, music):

> Music does not exist in a vacuum. Geographical space is not an ‘empty stage’ on which aesthetic, economic, and cultural battles are contested. Rather, music and space are actively and dialectically related. Music shapes spaces, and spaces shape music. In various ways sounds have been used to create spaces and suggest and stimulate patterns of human behavior in particular locations. (2003, 192).

Digital sound studies scholars have explored the aforementioned implications of space and sound upon digital social spaces. Jonathan W. Stone writes about his encounter with the vocal group Choir! Choir! Choir!, on YouTube. He describes the experience, locating “two ‘locales’ of a

shared public experience: popular music and the digital interface" (66). This example demonstrates a specific relationship between sound and the internet, where social networks serve both as archives of audio and visual media, and as gathering spaces:

> Their performances are recorded, archived on YouTube, and thereby distributed to the world where we can then participate in them and even emulate them in our own communities…Indeed, digital networks like YouTube are pulling dispersed individuals into purposive communities and enabling the singular voice of radio, television, and internet to become a collective one. (71)

The assertions Stone makes are also applicable to other social media networks like "Instagram, Vine, and Snapchat, which allow for the quick and simple distribution of vernacular sound and video to a large audience…" (71). Stone's observations show a relationship between sound, social media, and people that is contingent on not only the virtual space that accommodates such relationships, but the ability for people to interact with social media content as well as one another.

Ambrose Field's chapter "Simulation and Reality: the New Sonic Objects," in *Music, Electronic Media and Culture*, discusses several theories that attempt to delineate 'real' sounds from simulated ones. Ultimately, Field concludes:

> The advancement of cheaper and more sophisticated technology, coupled with a public that is becoming increasingly media-aware, has resulted in a situation where 'new sounds' are no longer a domain solely exploited by the electroacoustic composer. In such a world the assumption that it matters what the source of a sound actually is, is possibly becoming irrelevant" (39).

This is yet another example of the convergence of virtual and physical space, placing sound as a marker of spaces that are both real and not real.

Field goes on to further articulate different aspects of reality within the context of the genre of electroacoustic music, which is uniquely able to present both "real-life sounds" and new, unfamiliar sounds. The sonic landscapes that Field discusses cover four categories of "landscape morphology": hyper-real[13], real, virtual, and non-real. The relation between sound, environment, and other metrics (such as time), are what ultimately set each landscape apart. In terms of electroacoustic music, "Virtual environments can account for what is colloquially termed 'ambiguity'…Such environments are not themselves ambiguous, as they have been carefully constructed to provide the features and cues of reality, without representing reality itself" (46). Though this definition was constructed specifically with the electroacoustic genre in mind, one could contend that this quality of ambiguity is useful in understanding not just the virtual environments that we interact with, but the sounds that exist within them.

As part of a social media platform, the sounds that are accessible on TikTok are seemingly infinite. So too are their uses. On TikTok, sounds are created, used, and further changed and developed to serve users' creative methods of communication. Often, it is not solely the sonic qualities of the sounds themselves, but the contextual and communicative structures built around them that make them effective. As TikTok noted on their website, "TikTok has completely remixed the world of sound, putting creativity back into the hands of creators and brands…From re-imagining jingles into sonic identities, to engineering songs just for TikTok

[13] Field borrows this term with Baudrillard, citing Baudrillard's example of Disneyland as "the ultimate hyper-reality, as this is a place where entire towns are re-created with saccharin coridality" (Baudrillard, 1981, as cited in Field, 2000).

viralities, artists and brands are exploring new tracks here to break through the noise" (TikTok, "Volume 1: Evolution of Sound").

The function of TikTok sounds fits well into the interpretive framework that Field uses to analyze electroacoustic music. Field explains:

> When sounds possess contextual information, there is the possibility for that information to be used as a compositional parameter itself. 'Sonic rhetoric' is a means by which links can be made between musical processes and extrinsic contextual information. Semiotics show us that communication can result from exchange using common codes." (47)

Field explores multiple "basic archetypes for sonic communication", each used as a term to refer to the ways in which sounds are given context to provide inferred layers of meaning. One such archetype described by Field is the 'sonic simile', which "gives new meaning to an existing sound by juxtaposing it with new material" (48). The sonic simile is perhaps the most applicable semiotic term in regards to TikTok, where sounds are constantly remixed and recycled, contextualized within images and text. Such language lends an understanding of sound as not a stationary object, but a malleable and transformative medium.

Concepts of virtuality and mobility have developed in the study of virtual music, highlighting the unique qualities of the internet and cyberspace. Shara Rambarran published a book titled, *Virtual Music,* in 2021, in which she describes virtuality as a quality of virtual spaces that opens new creative applications of sound without the necessity of physical proximity or the inconvenience of waiting.

> …we are not restricted to where we must be situated, as long we have a decent internet connection, and in the case of music, we can unite with, or witness musicians and audience/consumers interacting, uniting, and championing existing and new musical

> creations. It is no surprise then, that the musician and audience/consumer relationship is now rarely separated, as together they can participate at any time and anywhere in virtual inventions and collaborations. This is aided by digital technology such as the use of musical instruments or machines, software, and apps. (2021, 2)

Within virtual space, sounds share the capacity to be created and shared with the masses, foregoing older, more established models of music production and recording. By suspending the barriers of time and proximity, we can understand TikTok to be not only a part of the internet or cyberspace. TikTok operates as a space in and of itself, where sound not only exists but has a role in creating communal spaces on TikTok. Connell and Gibson comment on the nature of cyberspace, specifically on the mobility of virtual spaces: "Metaphors of hybridity and of fluid, virtual spaces only explain part of the story; mobility triggers new attempts at fixity--holding on to traditions despite losses of popular appeal, constructing spaces for local expressions (both material and discursive), developing cultural industries, marketing music through place and marketing place through music" (2003, 46). Indeed, attempts at concretely defining virtual spaces in all of their ambiguity are futile. However, as Connell and Gibson state, there are fixed points at which the relationship between a virtual sound and space can be observed. This is where we can find expressions of self that contend with the virtuality and physicality of virtual space.

Identity and Community through the Lens of Neoliberal Capitalism

> 'Welcome to the internet
> Have a look around
> Anything that brain of yours can think of can be found'[14]

[14] Bo Burnham, "Welcome to the Internet*"* (New York: Republic Records, 2021).

Bo Burnham's "Welcome to the Internet" is one of the many songs featured in his 2021 comedy special *Inside,* and subsequent album, *Inside (The Songs),* a product of a year spent in a global pandemic, focusing on, as one reviewer phrased, "our maddening over-reliance on the internet" (McQuillan, 1230). Bo Burnham's performance of "Welcome to the Internet" embodies, both aurally and lyrically, the experience of being online; in a virtual world of possibilities that is chaotic, exciting, and terrifying. It is the experience of being offered "a little bit of everything all of the time" (Burnham). TikTok's report on music usage in the year 2021 stated, "Nearly every song included in *Inside* generated over thousands of video creations, as his fans on TikTok reflected on the deep questions Burnham asked about living life online."[15] "Welcome to the Internet" as a TikTok sound has been used in over 19,500 TikTok videos as of April 2022. There are some trends that accompany the sound—specifically acting challenges—but really, it is a little bit of everything.

TikTok, with its never-ending stream of content, offers exactly what Bo Burnham describes, which is what made the platform "a capitalist success story amid a global economic crisis" (Kennedy, 1070). Scholar Melanie Kennedy reflected on the use of TikTok in a 2020 article, noting that "frivolous" TikTok videos were the perfect medium for online entertainment while in quarantine. But, as Kennedy pointed out, the popularity and success of TikTok as a social media network cannot be understood outside the context of neoliberal capitalism, as it is one of the conditions that shapes our world and our individual and collective lived experiences.

As an audiovisual medium, TikTok videos can be analyzed through a similar lens applied to the music videos that arose out of the 1980s era of MTV. Jody Berland noted in 1986, in "Sound, Image, and Social Space: Rock Video and Media Reconstruction," that the integration

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[15] "Year on TikTok 2021 Music Report," *Newsroom*, December 13, 2021. https://newsroom.tiktok.com/en-us/year-on-tiktok-music-report-2021.

of sound and image together "has been, from the beginning, economically ruthless, ideologically loaded, sumptuously artificial" (35). Berland regards the guitar as an instrument of music as well as a symbol of genre and culture, adding additional layers of meaning to the music video itself. The cultural constructions apparent in the music video medium result in oxymoronic implications:

> [The guitar] articulates "this performance is real, this is an authentic cultural action, rock is real speech, today's folk culture, today's resistance, today's performance art, today's truth, today's avant-grade, today's lyric poem—*and also*; don't take this seriously as art, you understand, or as anything else either; this is just a commercial. (44)

This conflation between art and advertisement is especially palpable on social media, where the practice of marketing the self as a brand has potential for garnering not only social attention, but also economic rewards. Generating viral content ultimately promotes interaction which sustains the social media network in which the content resides, generating monetary value for the company and its shareholders. Creators, once a certain threshold of popularity is reached, are also given opportunities to profit from their work,[16] which some dedicate their careers to. Capitalism permeates not only physical reality, but virtual reality and the overlapping spaces between. The utilization of social media networks for the purposes of capital gain is not only present in how the network itself operates, but how users navigate the network, how they produce content, and how they build their "brand."

Portraying one's self is sometimes an appealing factor of being on a social media platform. Nancy Thumim argues in *Self Representation and Digital Culture* that participating

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[16] "Creator Fund," *TikTok Creator Port*al, November 5, 2021, https://www.tiktok.com/creators/creator-portal/en-us/getting-paid-to-create/creator-fund/. Accessed April 4, 2022.

socially online is predicated upon self-representation (2012, 137). Thumim discusses the mediations of self-representation online, identifying the ways in which portrayals of one's self are influenced by the structure of the social media platform and societal and cultural rules. Genre is also a factor, especially in determining the authenticity of displays of identity online:

> Considering the mediation of self-representation as being concerned with the idea of value, we can turn to the notion of genre as a way of making sense of ubiquitous self-representations. For what is always striking about self-representations is the 'amateur aesthetic' on which they rely and which invokes both celebration and derision. Perhaps the ameteur is always linked to the idea of authenticity, and both with the genre of self-representation. (2012, 162)

Though the authentic self is what is demanded of social media platforms, the idea of authenticity itself has arguably been deeply influenced by late-stage neoliberal capitalism. David Harvey defines neoliberalism as "a theory of political economic practices proposing that human well-being can best be advanced by the maximization of entrepreneurial freedoms within an institutional framework characterized by private property rights, individual liberty, unencumbered markets, and free trade."[17] As such, neoliberalism transforms sites of social and creative exchange into market places, where one is able to not only create and present content, but can render one's self as a source of capital. As one TikToker observed, the "authentic self" has become nearly devoid of meaning under neoliberal capitalism:

> So one way to figure out whether or not a word or phrase or an idea has become a floating signifier (floating signifier = a term with no referent; often adaptable & with no

[17] Harvey, David. "Neoliberalism as Creative Destruction." *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 610, no. 1 (March 2007): 21. https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716206296780.

> clear meaning) is to see if you could imagine it on a Forever 21 tee shirt. For example, the idea of authenticity, self-optimizing imperatives like "be yourself," "love yourself," that are actually sold on Forever 21 tee shirts, reflect the social imperative to perform authenticity. At this point, no one even knows what it means to be yourself anymore. The authentic self has become synonymous with the marketable self, with the profitable self. Like all measurements of subjecthood under neoliberalism, authenticity has been commodified to the point where it no longer references an actual material self, but instead a caricature. For example, when you go into a job interview and they say, "Oh, we just want you to be yourself, be authentic." What they mean is "We want you to be a good worker." The authentic self is the self that cares about profit. Anyways, if you can imagine it on a Forever 21 tee shirt, then it's been commodified to the point where it doesn't really have a meaning anymore."[18]

As a result of this economic paradigm, which also privileges the labor value of individuals, the neoliberal subject is expected present their self as a brand, especially online.

Katherine Meizel's *Multivocality* discusses the implications of neoliberal capitalism on the perceived relationship of self-authenticity to vocality, a term that frames singing as "both an embodied act and a constructive process" that "factor into the making of culture and identity, and in the negotiation of power" (2020, 11). Meizel examines the ways in which singers strive for a sense of authenticity in their vocal identities as well as "the process of branding that self in the neoliberal music market" (2020, 25). Placed within the context of the singing voice, Meizel presents the pursuit of an authentic self as a process that is also entangled with the marketable, consumable self. This can result in multiple vocalities, as Meizel states, "[Singers] may rely on

[18] (@meiyarose, "idk maybe i just hate the word "authentic." December 13, 2021. https://www.tiktok.com/@meiyarose/video/7041233168183282991.)

shifts in vocality to negotiate the boundaries and intersections of different geographical, social, and cultural spaces, and to sound their intersubjective individualities in new places." In the representations of ourselves that we present online, be it sonic, visual, or otherwise, we navigate a social environment shaped by socioeconomic demands. Like all social media platforms, TikTok is a place in which users present selves that contend with their own authentic identities as well as the performative aspects of those identities, which are utilized in order to appeal to the demands of consumers. This is an important aspect of virtual spaces that must be navigated in order to be seen online.

CHAPTER II. INTERVIEW AND CASE STUDIES

It's 10:44pm on a Tuesday evening. My attention drifts from the blank page and the perpetual blink of my stationary cursor to my phone. I pick up my phone, unlock my home screen, open TikTok and begin to scroll through my "For You Page".

This is what I see:	***This is what I hear:***
An artist painting a canvas	*"Rises the Moon" by Liana Flores*
An ironic sketch of a romantic exchange between a man and a woman	*Russian punk rock - "*нркт*" by* досвидос
A costume-maker putting on the layers of an 18th-century dragon-patterned gown	*"Vogue" by Madonna*
A Black woman speaking on white mediocrity	*The voice of a Black woman*
A tongue-in-cheek joke about pronouns	*An edit of "LGBT" by cupcakKe*
A tutorial of how to paint a hyperrealist painting	*"Giddy Up Let's Ride" by Kinsu*
A person getting dressed, putting on jewelry, doing their makeup	*A portion of "On Gender," a poem by Tallie Gabriel, voiced over the song "You" by Petit Biscuit:* *The other day, someone asked me if I identify as a woman and I said,* *I don't know* *when I meant:* *sometimes yes, on a tuesday at 2 pm* *or for the whole month of august, or during libra season or during happy hour* *sometimes yes because it's easier and sometimes because it's true* *sometimes yes because the term for whatever is nested in the skin isn't in my vocabulary yet*

or someone told me, but I forgot it somewhere along
the way from my house to this restaurant

sometimes no
when woman is synonymous to prey is synonymous to
easy target is synonymous to lunch meat
sometimes no when I want to leave my drink
unattended at the bar and walk the long way home after

because beautiful evenings should be left for walking
the long way and not for clutching your keys
only following street lights

sometimes no when I think of pirate captains
think of my inner child as a little boy
think of how I want to be pretty but like,
in the way men are pretty

sometimes yes, when I take a bath in the
dictionary definition of divine feminine,
sometimes yes, when I think
"god, don't you just love it when women…"

yes and no
and also maybe, catch me on a rainy day sipping just-
steeped coffee as a fog clouds
our view of the ocean and asked me then

someone asks me if I am a woman and I say

sometimes[19]

And it continues on and on, an endless stream of sights, sounds, and text. happening in quick succession. This is the place where I go to be carried along the infinite parade of media; in the mornings when I sit with my coffee, in the afternoons when I come home and settle on my couch, at night when I can't fall asleep.

[19] "On Gender" by Tallie Gabriel, used with author's permission.

A Conversation with Tallie Gabriel

I met with Gabriel over Zoom in March of 2022 to talk about their[20] poem "On Gender" and discuss their experiences on TikTok. Gabriel downloaded TikTok just before the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Their account was initially created with the intention of promoting their band, Camp Bedford Rescue Squad, but instead found their way to "queertok" and an outlet for sharing their poetry. Gabriel describes their discovery of "queertok" this way:

> The algorithm pretty quickly put me into queertok and it was really amazing. I have, you know, changed my pronouns a couple of times during this time because of just seeing people talk about things that clicked in my mind and made sense on TikTok. And seeing queer people just—I mean, I live in New York City, so I am surrounded by a lot of queer people in real life and I'm very grateful for that. But seeing, still, just even more, different types of ways that queer people are living their lives and expressing themselves. And I was like, "Oh my gosh, this is so much more than just like a fun, silly entertaining app," even though it is still that. I was really moved by a lot of stuff that I saw there and really inspired… and then yeah, one of my friends, my friends was like, "You should put your poems on Tik Tok." So I started doing that, probably a year ago, and I've just sort of recently hit on some formats that I think are working (Interview, Tallie Gabriel, March 9, 2022).

Gabriel's experience echoes testimonies shared by other queer TikTok users like @evanhoover15 who posted a TikTok in August of 2021 with the text "when it was supposed to

[20] Tallie Gabriel uses they/them pronouns.

be two weeks on zoom and now you don't have a gender."[21] An article by BBC published in February of 2022 investigates a wide-spread shift in gender and sexuality during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in women, or people assigned female at birth. The author, Jessica Klein, credits this shift to the prolonged period of isolation during quarantine, when social expectations were lifted. Klein cites a survey of 4,000 users on the dating app, Bumble, in the United Kingdom, Ireland, Australia, and Canada, in August 2020. The survey found that 21% planned on expressing their sexuality differently than they did a year ago. Another survey reported 14% of users changing their sexual preferences from one gender to another.[22] Klein shared a conversation with clinical psychologist Jennifer Guttman, who attributed this shift in gender and sexual preference to the ability to "press the pause button during lockdown" and enter a period of self-reflection. And, like Gabriel, the individuals interviewed by Klein cited TikTok as the initiating force of these explorations in identity, as the algorithm connected them with a community of people going through similar experiences.

Tallie Gabriel's experience on TikTok parallel this phenomenon of shifting gender identities and expressions, not only from the passive position of a consumer of TikTok content, but also as a creator. Gabriel posted their video reading their poem "On Gender" on January 10, 2022. The video went viral, amassing over 793,000 views and over 217,000 likes. During our conversation, Gabriel describes writing their poem "On Gender" in response to being asked if they identified as a woman:

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[21] @evanhoover15. 2021. "and now i pray to the moon? weird…", *TikTok,* August 26, 2021. https://www.tiktok.com/@evanhoover15/video/7000749472707906821?is_from_webapp=1&sender_device=pc.

[22] Klein, Jessica, "Why sexual identities shifted during the pandemic," *BBC,* Febrauary 25, 2022. https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20220224-why-sexual-identities-shifted-during-the-pandemic.

> It was actually something I wrote back in December when I was home for the holidays. And something about the nostalgia slash seeing people from my childhood and my family…I was just kind of steeped in that, like, "Wow, I'm, like, really different from all of the examples of people that I grew up with." And then I just actually wrote the first draft of that poem when I was doing laundry. I was just doing my laundry and thinking about the first line of: someone asked me if I'm a woman, and I said, "I don't know." It's true, that happened. I was like, "I don't know how to answer this question. So, I'm going to do what I do when I'm figuring something out. And that's write about it."
>
> And it just happened in poem form, and was a pretty quick process…I had been, I think, jotting down little notes about my gender, or what I feel like my gender feels like. So I've been ruminating on the concept of my gender. Pretty much just, at some point during the pandemic when we stopped…having to perform gender so much in public. Like, what do I feel like inside actually? So I was jotting down a lot of notes and a lot of metaphors. And then when I was home, and something about just being around all those people who had known me in a certain way, and I'm like, "Whoa, I feel very different, I'm gonna write about it." (Interview, Tallie Gabriel, March 9, 2022).

The video that accompanies their voice reading their poem shows Gabriel putting on clothes, makeup, and jewelry. Gabriel describes this creative decision, saying:

> The idea to do the voiceover on a video of me getting ready is because I also love clothes… I love clothes and accessories and using tattoos, and using clothing and tattoos and accessories to express myself the way that they're meant to. I've initially sort of struggled with like, I do like a lot of feminine clothing and makeup and stuff like that. And people see me often and they're like, "That's a cis woman for sure." And I'm like,

> "Am I, though? Is that what I am?" So that's why I thought it would be interesting to pair it with a video of my own getting ready process, because I feel like sometimes the way we dress ourselves and accessorize ourselves… it's separate from gender. And that's hard for people to grasp. Sometimes it was hard for me to grasp, too (Interview, Tallie Gabriel, March 9, 2022).

The poem was lovingly embraced by its found audience, filled with comments of affirmation and gratitude. Gabriel's poem was able to express a concept of gender that resonated with others, helping them to understand their own feelings as well as providing language to express their identity to others:

> The art that I feel is the most powerful often is something that I'm like, "Wow, I hope I can be a voice for people who feel the same way and just haven't quite been able to speak to it yet or articulate it yet. And this could help them feel seen or unlock something like that." So the reason I put it on TikTok, and wanted to make a video of it instead of just sharing the text was partially because of, you know, the clothing. And I think it's like…to [see] the thoughts in my head, as you have to see my face. There's something that feels intimate about that in a way that I like. But also…because I was like, "Who knows who the algorithm is going to show this to." I know people say this all the time, but I truly, truly did not expect it to blow up the way it did, because I posted lots of poems on TikTok that, like, you know, maybe reached a couple hundred people. So I was like, "Oh, I bet the algorithm will show this to a couple of other people who are just figuring their gender out right now, and this might help them." (Tallie Gabriel, March 9, 2022).

In describing the intention of posting their poem on TikTok, Gabriel also articulated the power found within the vulnerable act of being seen and being heard. In Gabriel's case, sharing their

innermost musings resulted in a chain reaction of engagement; leading others to comment their reactionary thoughts and feelings and using Gabriel's voice to make their own videos. Some viewers even showed the video to their family members as a way of coming out or to describe their gender identity. This was not Gabriel's first experience having a video go viral; a video posted over the summer of 2021 also gained popularity. Gabriel describes what it was like to see other TikTokers use their voice in their own videos:

> First of all it is very surreal to watch other people's faces do stuff to your voice. It was very, very beautiful and emotional to watch people be vulnerable to words that I have said and to put themselves out there in a way that—I mean, it is a little scary to do it, even though I felt great about it. And I still feel good about it. It's always a little bit scary to be like, here are some thoughts about myself that a lot of people will not understand, they don't care to understand. And I'm going to share it with [however] many people anyway. To see other people use my words and that sound and be vulnerable in their ways, it feels a little bit like, "Oh my gosh, yes. Y'all, we got this." It feels very...I still am having trouble finding a way to explain how it feels because it's very gratifying. I feel very humbled and honored to have that place in people's lives. Even if it's just they took the time out of their day to make a video to somethin' that I said. That feels very, very like no small thing, you know? (Interview, Tallie Gabriel, March 9, 2022).

Gabriel's insights as creator of TikTok sounds brings to light not only the phenomenon of sound used as an expression of identity, but the vulnerable act of creating and participating in these trends. Virtual spaces can be used to embrace such vulnerability, where one's self can be explored and expressed. The proceeding sections of this chapter will examine specific trends on

the queer side of TikTok; how sound creates a space where issues of identity, community, authenticity and virtuality converge.

Do you listen to girl in red? Sound as Queer-Coded Virtual Language

The question, "Do you listen to girl in red[23]?" started circulating within TikTok's sapphic[24] community shortly after the beginning of quarantine in 2020. This question is typically posed to inquire after someone's sexuality, but more specifically towards female or feminine presenting individuals. Responses to the question take a variety of innovative forms presented within the TikTok video format; performative gestures that use sound to communicate identities that both relate to and defy the boundaries of labels. One example of this is a video by TikTok user @chaoticwitchaunt, who responds to the "girl in red" question posed by their followers. They don't say a word, but instead use the full extent of TikTok's abilities to communicate their answer. @chaoticwitchaunt is positioned in front of the camera, under the text, "ive gotten a lot of questions about my sexuality so …". The sound "i wanna be your girlfriend" by openly queer Norwegian singer-songwriter girl in red accompanies the images, as can be seen in the text at the bottom of the screen. And to dispel any confusion, the video is captioned with, "Hope this answers ur questions ! #bicon #wlw #sapphic #witches #lgbtqia #genderflux."[25]

On the surface, this video is simple, or possibly vague, to the uninformed viewer. However, there is a wealth of information embedded in the sound, text, and images displayed. In 2021 Grace Tucker, arts editor of the *Michigan Daily*, wrote about the "girl in red" phenomenon

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[23] "girl in red" is the artist name for lesbian Norwegian musician Marie Ulven Ringheim.
[24] This term is used as an in-culture word within the queer community to signify woman loving woman attractions, similarly to the way it appears as a hashtag in social media posts, taking the form "#sapphic."
[25] (@chaoticwitchaunt.) "Hope this answers ur questions ! #bicon #wlw #sapphic #witches #lgbtqia #genderflux." TikTok. May 9, 2020. https://www.tiktok.com/@chaoticwitchaunt/video/6824893515957325061.

on TikTok, analyzing the trend through personal experience on TikTok and interviews with fellow University of Michigan students. Tucker describes the ways in which TikTok creates queer communities, including a degree of queer visibility that "has been characterized by a considerable shift toward candid depictions of queer *presentation.* That is, it's begun to democratize the physical 'codes'' that signify that a person (in this case, a female-identifying person) is…you know" (Tucker, 2021). The "girl in red" question steps beyond the inference of queerness in a visual sense and into a coded language centered around sound. Tucker writes that among the array of queer femme signifiers on TikTok (fashion, jewelry, piercings, hairstyles, makeup, etc.), an "affinity for indie-sad-girl artists like Julia Jacklin and Phoebe Bridgers" is also a clue. "When I see any one of or a combination of these things, I can usually assume that a female-identifying person's response to the weighted 'are you gay?' question is affirmative" (Tucker, 2021). Such queer coded-language can also be located in a long history of underground queer cultures, such as the "Pansy Craze" of the 1920s-1930s, which used coded symbols to signify queer identities, communities, and social movements.[26]

There are many ways to respond to the "girl in red" question. The song "Sweater Weather" by The Neighborhood and music by Frank Ocean have both been used on TikTok to signify bisexuality. Using songs like "My Little Dark Age" by MGMT or "Hayloft" by Mother Mother represent non-binary identities that may be attracted to women. A mashup of girl in red's "i wanna be your girlfriend" and The Neighborhood's "Sweater Weather" proclaimed as the "bi/lesbian confusion anthem."[27] Asking "Do you listen to girl in red?" can be understood simply

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[26] Prager, Sarah. "Four Flowering Plants That Have Been Decidedly Queered," *JSTOR Daily.* January 29, 2020. https://daily.jstor.org/four-flowering-plants-decidedly-queered/.
[27] (@lukesomething). 2020. "happy pride month everybody [pride flag emoji] #foryou #fyp #pride #pridemonth #lgbtq #bi #lesbian #gay #girlinred #sweaterweather #mashup #TikTokArtists". *TikTok,* June 16, 2020. https://vm.tiktok.com/ZTda81J8J/.

as an indirect inquiry into someone's sexuality, a modern iteration of the long-standing history of coded messaging designed to create queer identifiers within the community while also protecting against discrimination and violence.

The process of creating a response to the "girl in red" question may also be analyzed through theories of queer performance and performativity. Judith Butler suggests that gender is a construct, a series of gestures and acts performed within the body, stating:

> I suggest that gendered bodies are so many 'styles of the flesh'. These styles all never fully self-styled, for styles have a history, and those histories condition and limit the possibilities. Consider gender, for instance, as a *corporeal style*, an 'act', as it were, which is both intentional and performative, where '*performative*' suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning." (Butler, 1999)

Such performances are built on the premise of repetition, constituting an identity that is not stable but is "tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts.*"[28] In this way, we can understand a girl in red TikTok performance not as just an expression of identity, but as the creation of identity, a highly stylized performance in which queerness is pronounced physically and virtually.

The broader context of the relational dynamic between sound and space places TikTok sounds as more than simply the background accompaniment to visual performances or symbolic references to identity. Judith Butler's ideation of gender frames sound as having a distinct role in the construction of gender identity. On TikTok, sounds present opportunities for stylized performative acts that communicate an idea about the performer to their audience. Furthermore,

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[28] Butler, Judith. "From Interiority to Gender Performance", in *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject,* edited by Fabio Cleto. (361-368). Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1999.

the "girl in red" trend demonstrates the utilization of sound in order to create virtual space for queer individuals and communities, allowing for opportunities for members of the queer TikTok community to locate one another. Like many online communities, the queer TikTok community relies on such user-generated content to sustain itself. That is, the existence of these spaces and communities is dependent upon participation in these sound-oriented trends, creating opportunities for individuals to not only participate in activities within the community but to create and define their individual selves. The online individual and community are intricately linked in such a way that also renders the self hypervisible to the public:

> For all of us who enter social media networks, we find not the denaturalized, disembodied digital space purported to offer a liberating anonymity. Rather, this hope for invisibility of the body has been replaced by a requirement of its hypervisibility. Being linked in to social media protocols means being always connected, always participating in the unceasing assembly of digital information for which we are constantly performing. (Mikhel Proulx, 2016)[29]

In the months leading up to posting my own girl in red video, no one had posed "the question" to me, but I had been asking myself. Do I listen to girl in red? If someone asked me, what would I say? How would I respond? I made my answer in the late fall of 2020. As part of a final project for a graduate seminar, I made a TikTok. I also made my own sound, mixing together music from girl in red, Frank Ocean, "Sweater Weather," and MGMT. I choreographed queer-coded gestures such as rolling the cuffs of my jeans and putting on homemade earrings. Though it wasn't required of the assignment, I posted the video to my TikTok page. I was acutely aware of the risk of being seen by people I knew, to whom I hadn't disclosed my identity. Yet, I wanted to

[29] Mikhel Proulx (2016) Protocol and Performativity, Performance Research, 21:5, 114-118.

align myself with the community, to express myself in an act that was both personal and public. I took comfort in the notion that those who would see it and get it, would get it. And those who wouldn't, wouldn't.

***

I remember the conversation in fragments.

"So, you have a TikTok?"

My mother had found my TikTok. A cousin found my TikTok and showed it to my *mother*.

At the time I brushed it off as nothing, and we left the conversation there. With any luck, we would never revisit the subject.

But which TikTok had she seen?

I feared it was the one with the music by girl in red. The one where I'm lip-syncing to the lyrics, "they're so pretty it hurts, I'm not talking about boys I'm talking about girls."

I watched countless TikToks with songs by girl in red where people came out or disclosed their sexuality. I reveled in the thought of being able to make a statement without using my own words. In my TikTok video I roll up the cuffs of my jeans, put in my homemade earrings, and dance along to music by girl in red, The Neighborhood, MGMT, and Frank Ocean. All orchestrated together to say: I am queer. I am attracted to multiple genders. I don't always see myself as a woman.

This wasn't meant to be my coming out video. I reassured myself numerous times that my family wouldn't ever find my TikTok videos.

"So, you have a TikTok?"

My coming out would happen approximately a year later over breakfast at a Bob Evans.

I played Mitski in the car on the drive home.

I don't want the world to see

That I've been the best I can be, but

I don't think I could stand to be

Where you don't see me[30]

It went well, all things considered. As they told me, this doesn't really change anything. I'm still me.

I convinced myself for years that I would never tell my parents about my sexuality. It would be easier to not come out at all, to not have to explain or justify myself. I was prepared for disapproval, and abandoned the expectation of approval.

, but

I don't think I could stand to be

Where you don't see me

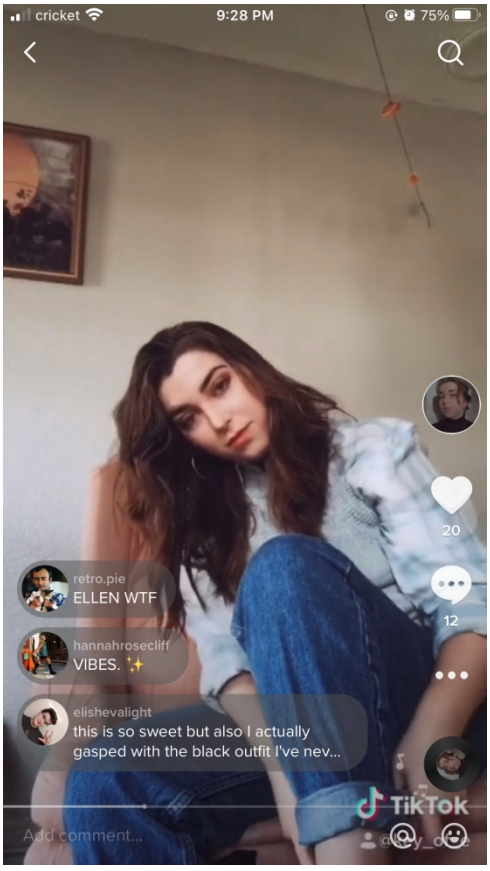

Figure 1. A screenshot image of the author's TikTok video, originally captioned, "#girlinred #lgbt #bi #bitiktok #sweaterweather #mgmtlittledarkage," posted on December 9, 2020.

[30] Mitski, "Francis Forever" (New York: Double Double Whammy, 2014).

The Caroline Polachek Dance Trend: Queer Aesthetics and Exclusive Queer Spaces

U.S. singer-songwriter Caroline Polachek released "So Hot You're Hurting My Feelings" as the twelfth track in her breakout 2019 album *Pang*. The song found a new life on TikTok as a queer dance trend, first appearing there in December of 2021.[31] The music video inspired what can be described as a quintessential TikTok dance trend, in which people recreate the music video choreography of "So Hot You're Hurting My Feelings" in their homes, to the words of the chorus:

I get a little lonely

Get a little more close to me

You're the only one who knows me, babe

So hot you're hurting my feelings (woo)

Can't deal[32]

The music video sets Polachek in a hellish scene; inside a cave with a red sky stretching across a barren landscape in the background. The music itself is quintessentially pop, Polachek's voice is supported by synths and breathy backup vocals. The rhythm is catchy and danceable, but laid back.

This dance was choreographed by C Prinz, who has worked with Polachek on several projects, including her live performances. According to a piece in the *New Yorker,* C Prinz created the choreography "by watching Polachek move freely to her music and then sharpening

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[31] Matt Moen, "TikTok Discovered the Majesty of Caroline Polachek's 'Pang'," *Paper Magazine.* December 30, 2021. https://www.papermag.com/tiktok-caroline-polachek-2656197720.html?rebelltitem=7#rebelltitem7

[32]Caroline Polachek, "So Hot You're Hurting My Feelings," *Pang.* Perpetual Novice, September 16, 2019.

her gestures, giving her imaginary props to hold."[33] [34] The effect of this choreography comes across as a balanced combination of aesthetics. It is awkward, yet compelling, rigid and fluid, expressive yet reserved, choreographed and spontaneous at the same time. The work of C Prinz has been described as one that "asks something of the viewer and forces them to confront some part of themselves that is entirely sensation-based, instead of necessarily cerebral."[35]

Videos featuring the choreography from the chorus of Polachek's song started appearing on my TikTok feed at the end of December of 2021. According to my notes taken on December 31, 2021, by that date Caroline Polachek's song as a sound on TikTok only had 3,243 videos. The amount of videos in the early months of the Caroline Polachek trend weren't indicative of a large, wide-spread trend. However, it was enough to constitute a trend within the queer TikTok community. Caroline Polachek's "So Hot You're Hurting My Feelings" did grow exponentially in popularity, as of April of 2022 there were 83,000 TikTok videos under the sound. Some examples of TikTok videos from the beginning of this trend demonstrate the connection between Caroline Polachek's song as a TikTok sound and the queer TikTok community:

> @mariconadaz_, "Couldn't be left out of the queer square dance in hell #carolinepolachek #enby #queer #theythem."[36]

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[33] Tolentino, Jia. 2021. "Vox Pop." New Yorker 97 (29): 28–33.
[34] See Caroline Polachek. "Caroline Polachek - So Hot You're Hurting My Feelings (Official Video)." YouTube. October 2, 2019. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sn3cHUtNZKo.
[35] El-Sabrout, Omar. "C Prinz." *The Future Happened.* Undated. https://thefuturehappened.org/c-prinz
[36] (@mariaconadaz_.) "Couldn't be left out of the queer square dance in hell #carolinepolachek #enby #queer #they/them." TikTok. December 28, 2021. https://www.tiktok.com/@mariconadaz_/video/7046974006628666671?_t=8QwkEwGYyfT&_r=1.

> @ukellela, "doing the shyhmf dance in the balaclava I just finished crocheting… this is queer culture I am Sure of it." Captioned: "I am @ellajanemusic btw #crochet #balaclava #carolinepolachek #bi #wlw #oatmilk #lol,"[37] posted December 30, 2021.
>
> @morganneyam "If this dance is filling your fyp then you're definitely on [fingernail paint emoji] TikTok cuz the sound only has 2,000 vids." Captioned, "I chaos in my room for me."[38]
>
> @jayybeech "POV: You're on [fingernail paint emoji] TikTok", captioned, "My FYP has been blessed with these all morning [orange heart emoji] #fyp #lgbtq."[39]
>
> @kelley.heyer, "Are you even queer if this isn't all over your FYP #carolinepolachek #queer."[40]

Another participant in the Caroline Polachek trend is Tallie Gabriel, who uploaded a TikTok video doing the Polachek dance with a friend after attending a work meeting. Gabriel told me:

> One of my best friends, who's also a queer woman, we actually had a work meeting and then had drinks after the work meeting. And we're like, "let's do a TikTok dance." And that was the week that it was everywhere. So we have to do this one.
>
> But there's something about it's–like that I don't even know how to explain to non-queer people–that it's just like the queerest dance and sound. It just is. It's just like the way the movements are. It's like hyper feminine, but also in a queer way. It's just different from

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[37] (@ukellela.) "i am @ellajanemusic btw #crochet #balaclava #carolinepolachek #bi #wlw #oatmilk #lol." TikTok. December 30, 2021. https://vm.tiktok.com/ZTdqNpyVo/.
[38] (@morganneyam.) "Its the chaos in my room for me." TikTok. December 30, 2021. https://vm.tiktok.com/ZTdqNKMTv/.
[39] (@jayybeech.) "My FYP has been blessed with these all morning [orange heart emoji] #fyp #lgbtq." TikTok. December 30, 2021. https://vm.tiktok.com/ZTdqNwBHE/.
[40] (@kelley.heyer, "Are you even queer if this isn't all over your FYP #carolinepolachek #queer.." TikTok. January 2, 2022. https://www.tiktok.com/@kelley.heyer/video/7048684238576553221.

> straight Tiktok dances. And to see so many queer women using that sound was like–or queer people–using that sound, felt like being part of this little community in a very cool way.
>
> And I was like, "This one's for us, this dance is for us", even though some straight people use it too. And, you know, that's always gonna happen. But that was a really cool moment. (Interview, Tallie Gabriel, March 9, 2022).

Gabriel's statement reveals a certain distinctive quality of the Caroline Polachek dance trend that made it a special moment in the queer TikTok community: it was aesthetically distinct from straight TikTok dance trends, making it an opportunity to participate in a performative gesture of community and belonging.

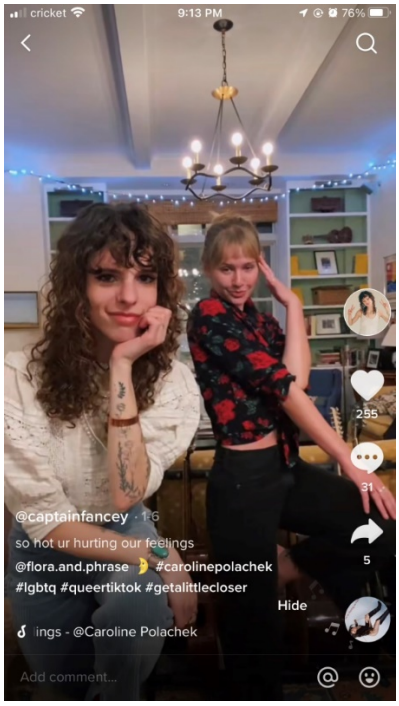

Figure 2. @captainfancey, captioned: "so hot ur hurting our feelings @flora.and.phrase [crescent moon emoji] #carolinepolachek #lgbtq #queertiktok #getalittlecloser", posted January 6, 2022.[41] [42]

[41] (@captainfancey.) "so hot ur hurting our feelings @flora.and.phrase [crescent moon emoji] #carolinepolachek #lgbtq #queertiktok #getalittlecloser." TikTok. January 6, 2022. https://vm.tiktok.com/ZTdqFkhDw/

The TikTok dance has emerged as a genre with a distinct set of identifiable features, as described in a piece in *Dance Magazine*:

> Dance has always found an audience on social media, but TikTok, more so than other platforms, has given rise to its own highly recognizable, easily reproducible style. Drawing from a lexicon of hip-hop–inspired moves—like the Dougie, the Dice Roll and Throw It Back, to name just a few—the micro-dances of TikTok are typically front-facing and most animated from the hips up, tailored to the vertical frame of a smartphone screen. Governed by time limits of 15 or 60 seconds, they also tend to stay in one place; you can do them pretty much anywhere. (Burke, 2021)

The Caroline Polachek dance trend shares the same parameters of time and space as well as a style that is, as Burke described, easily reproduced. However, the movements of the Caroline Polachek dance are not centered on a driving beat, but rather take the shape of more obscure, perhaps even odd, improvisational style.

There aren't any concrete ties between the song, its songwriter, and the queer community. Caroline Polachek herself has not disclosed any sort of queer identity, nor is the song about the queer community. Yet, there is a something that drew the queer side of TikTok to the song and dance. When asked what made Gabriel identify the trend as queer, they replied:

> It's hard to explain, you know? Like, I can't even explain why I know that this is queer. But it just is, and then you see the comments and they're like, "Yes, finally, a queer dance." And you're like, "See? I knew it." (Interview, Tallie Gabriel, March 9, 2022)

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[42] Image used with permission from author.

Black Queer Sounds, Black Queer Spaces

Queerness is often understood as a defiance of binaural categories and subversion of norms instituted by a white heteropatriarchal society. As David Halperin wrote, "Queer is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant" (1996, 62). As such, queer signifiers are not contained in any one definition, but are understood as an eclectic collection of subversive acts. In the Caroline Polachek dance trend, we see queerness in the distinctive aesthetic qualities of movement and sound that counter "straight" TikTok.[43] However, both the Caroline Polachek dance trend and the girl in red trend fail to provide spaces that accommodate for intersectional queer identities. Several TikTok creators have pointed out that the queer TikTok trends are centered around whiteness, leaving Black, indigenous, and people of color out of the picture.

Some TikTokers were quick to point out the ways in which the Caroline Polachek dance trend, though proclaimed to be for the queer community, was not *for* them:

> @nickkrollswife123, "Videos like this emphasize the fact that the white queer experience is very diffe[r]ent from the queer experience of people of color." / #duet with @333blaire333[44]
>
> @realcousinkisser, "Caroline Polachek is literally the new girl in red. For white gays who are very annoying and have no personality other than being queer." Captioned, "I have nothing against her. But I am still traumatized from "do u listen to girl in red."[45]

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[43] Iris Olde Hampsink, "Straight TikTok versus Alt TikTok: the creation of deviance from within", *Diggit Magazine.* May 28, 2021. https://www.diggitmagazine.com/articles/straight-alt-tiktok.

[44] (@nickkrollswife123.) "#duet with @333blaire333." TikTok. December 29, 2021. https://vm.tiktok.com/ZTdqNoBeU/.

[45] (@realcousinkisser.) "I have nothing against her. But I am still traumatized from "do u listen to girl in red." TikTok. December 30, 2021. https://vm.tiktok.com/ZTdqNKJAp/.

People came out in droves in comment sections to defend the trend, saying that the dance isn't about race, it's just innocent fun. Others support the criticism, pointing out that queer TikTok trends limit definitions of queerness to white experiences; trends like the Caroline Polachek dance simply do not account for the experiences of queer people of color.

Likewise, by responding to the question "Do you listen to girl in red?" users are given an opportunity to craft a performance that is tailored to themselves. However, these examples do not capture every response to the trend, and it must be noted that this method of coding queerness through specific songs ultimately fails to encompass the totality and fluidity of queerness. It also fails to represent people of color. User @childish_himbino commented on the girl in red trend, saying, "cool cool cool to all you lesbians that listen to girl in red but…i'm a black lesbian i listen to willow, syd, angel haze, kehlani…willow…did i say willow? janelle monae! yeah!"[46] Each artist listed by @childish_himbino is a Black queer musician, each equally viable candidates for the kind of iconic queer notoriety that girl in red receives.

The issue of a lack of intersectionality in queer spaces has been a pervasive issue within the queer community. Audre Lorde, whose roles as a political figure and as a Black, lesbian mother and poet have been influential in discourse on feminism, racism, and community, spoke about community throughout her work. Amber Jamilla Musser argues that Lorde's call for intersectional spaces is best represented in Lorde's essay "Uses of the Erotic." Lorde's discussion of the erotic locates both sensory and spiritual experiences in the body, the vessel that gives space for facets of identities to exist together and overlap. This understanding of identity works against what Musser calls "fragmentation" in communities, as "The major force that

[46] (@childish_himbino). 2020. "someone requested captions for this vid! check out the compilation vid & Spotify playlist i made! #blacklesbian #lesbian #lgbt #wlw #music #gay #poc". TikTok, July 13, 2020. https://vm.tiktok.com/ZTdaRKNwL/.

works against community is fragmentation, because it only imagines one source of oppression" (2016, 352), a luxury that Audre Lorde, and other Black queer people, cannot afford.

Zachary Blair's chapter "Boystown: Gay Neighborhoods, Social Media, and the (Re)production of Racism" poses the question, "Why are gay ghettos white?" to exclusionary gay neighborhoods both physically and virtually. Blair states that "digital social networking—a medium that has been regarded as a vehicle to build community and advance social justice—also functions as a vehicle for segregation and a means of reproducing heteronormativity" (2016, 287-288). Blair's analysis is formed around field research and ethnography on Boystown, a gay neighborhood in Chicago, conducted over the span of five years. This work illustrates the violent and racist lived experiences of Boystown residents, both online and "on the ground." This research was conducted around the year 2009, dating it significantly in the rapid integration of virtual and physical spaces. Despite this, Blair's work shows that these congruent environments reflect real experiences that have real ramifications upon Black queer people. He concludes his chapter by reflecting upon his case study in which "neighborhood-based digital practices on Facebook and neighborhood sociospatial practices (that is, community walks to curtail crime) not only constitute each other but also together create an exclusionary heteronormative environment where racism can flourish." Blair concludes his reflection by bringing attention to the queer community, saying, "Embedded within these practices are gay strategies that have focused on integrating into the middle classes and white hostility toward African Americans" (2016, 300). Blair's research clearly depicts the ways in which exclusionary environments are created by white queer people.

In a chapter in the collection *No Tea, No Shade: New Writings in Black Queer Studies*, Shaka McGlotten defines "black data" as "a response to big data's call" that include "some

possible political and affective vectors, some ways to refuse the call or perhaps even to hang up" (2016, 263). More specifically, McGlotten uses the term "black data" to refer to the reduction of the violence and trauma experienced by enslaved Africans and their descendants to a number or statistic. McGlotten's last section begins with lyrics from the song, "Google Google Apps Apps" written by a Latina drag queen named Persia and the members of DADDIE$ PLA$TIK. The song was written "in response to the stress of her imminent unemployment"-- a result of the gentrification of San Francisco (274). Persia's song "underscores the material effects the growth of digital companies have had on real-world spaces, in this case the forced exodus of the people and cultures that helped make San Francisco a political and creative laboratory, that made it a home to so many freaks, artists, and sexual adventures" (275).

Like Persia's song, Black queer people on TikTok have created and used sound that highlights the exclusion from queer spaces online. And, like previously discussed queer trends on TikTok, sound is the medium used to carve out digital space; in this case a specific space for those who have otherwise been alienated from their communities.

One such space was created under a TikTok sound titled "blk and ga", after Bob the Drag Queen, @bobthedragqueen, used the sound in a video posted on May 30, 2021.[47] [48] The sound is a parody of the TikTok viral sound "Castaways," a song originally featured in the animated children's show *Backyardigans*; the lyrics now are replaced with the words "Black and gay/you are Black and gay/you're so gay, you're so Black/you're so Black and gay." At the time I accessed this sound on March 25, 2022, the sound had been used in over 2,500 videos. This sound in particular is accompanied by two hand gestures, the Black power fist and the "limp

[47] (@bobthedragqueen.) Untitled. TikTok. May 30, 2021. https://vm.tiktok.com/ZTdqFsmXt/.
[48] The account of the user who originally made the sound, @iknowyoutookmyfortnite, has since been banned. The user's page exists, but all videos have been removed, including the original context in which the "blk and ga" sound was created.

wrist," creating an accessible video structure that users can replicate. The "limp wrist" has a fraught history of anti-gay rhetoric that has been used to belittle both queer and non-queer men alike for a lack of masculinity.[49] The physical gesture of the "limp wrist" has been reclaimed by the queer community, turning its position as a slur into a powerful symbol of protest.[50] In the context of a Black queer TikTok trend, the "blk and ga" sound builds a space for the celebration of Blackness and queerness. As user @eph.see stated in their "blk and ga" video, "scrolling this sound and only seeing blk ppl for once [Face with Party Horn and Party Hat emoji]," captioned "#gaslight #gatekeep #girlboss."[51]

Other trends also emulate the unique space of the "blk and ga" sound. Like @theoagreen and @they.them.ri who use their voice to create sound-generated TikTok spaces:

> @theoagreen, "Cc: whats up! I feel like your fyp is lacking black they/thems, sooooo heres me to fix that problem for you", captioned "Blessing your FYP with more black faces because [red heart emoji]."[52] posted January 23, 2021.

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[49] As stated by W.C. Harris, "Real men do not fear. Real men are not queer. Real men hit a baseball and fire a gun with confidence. Within this ethos, a leader rules either with an iron fist or a flexible—that is, a limp—wrist" (Harris, W.C. (2006), "In My Day It Used to Be Called a Limp Wrist": Flip-Floppers, Nelly Boys, and Homophobic Rhetoric in the 2004 US Presidential Campaign. *The Journal of American Culture*, 29: 278-295. https://doi-org.ezproxy.bgsu.edu/10.1111/j.1542-734X.2006.00371.x.)

[50] Emily K. Hobson explores the use of the fist and limp wrist in the mid-1970s as leftist queer grassroots organizations built alliances against problems as varied as rape, bias against effeminate men, and the US-backed Pinochet regime in Chile. They emphasized the personal meanings of gay liberation by proclaiming themselves "faggots" and by celebrating their juxtapositions of "limp wrists and clenched fists" (Emily K. Hobson. *Lavender and Red : Liberation and Solidarity in the Gay and Lesbian Left. American Crossroads*. Oakland, California: University of California Press, page 69, 2016).

[51] (@eph.see.) "#gaslight #gatekeep #girlboss." TikTok. June 2, 2021. https://vm.tiktok.com/ZTdqFNx8g/.

[52] (@theoagreen.) "Blessing your FYP with more black faces because [red heart emoji]." TikTok. January 23, 2021. https://vm.tiktok.com/ZTdqFauuQ/.

> @they.them.ri, sound titled “This sound is for Black and POC enbies”: “Okay if you’re black or a person of colour And you identify as non-binary gender queer or gender fluid React with this video right now Comment like Duet this stitch this Use this sound I want the world to see your awesome faces You are loved You are valid + you are awesome [sparkles emoji] I love you [sparkles emoji]" created with music “Aesthetic Girl” by Rosiles, captioned “Black Enbies? [black heart emoji] #nonbinaryhype #blacknonbinary #qpoc #blacktrans #qtpoc #blackenbymagic #genderfluid #genderqueer #blackqueer #pocenby #blackenby #nb.”[53] posted January 26, 2021.

Each of these three trends are examples of sonic digital spaces created for the purpose of creating a visible and audible community. The sounds used specifically call upon Black queer TikTok users to gather “under the sound,” to render themselves visible. By specifically inviting Black queer users to engage, these sounds purposefully do not leave room for potential appropriation by white TikTokers, straight or queer. These trends, though minor in the scope of large-scale internet trends, are important. @eph.see’s video in particular draws attention to how “for once” the Black, indeed the Black queer voice, amassed a Black queer community response. The long history of white appropriations of Black sound, Black music, and Black voices has manifested on TikTok in many ways, calling into question the ethical and social limits of using Black sounds in white performances.

On one hand, these examples of Black queer community construction around sound offer a reflection of the shortcomings of the white queer community: particularly the exclusion of QPOC experiences in universalized public understandings and theorizations of queerness, and

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[53] (@they.them.ri.) ““Black Enbies? [black heart emoji] #nonbinaryhype #blacknonbinary #qpoc #blacktrans #qtpoc #blackenbymagic #genderfluid #genderqueer #blackqueer #pocenby #blackenby #nb.” TikTok. January 26, 2021. https://vm.tiktok.com/ZTdqF5RDm/.

thus they create exclusionary spaces. This points to longstanding issues within the queer community, from whitewashing queer history to framing queerness around whiteness altogether. However, it would be a mistake to only see these sonically created Black and queer spaces as a reflection of whiteness. The existence of Black bodies in space, digital or otherwise, as presented here in this paper is a one-dimensional perspective–it cannot encompass the whole meaning of a Black queer life or representations thereof.

CHAPTER III. CONCLUSION

Due to the socially limiting aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic, virtuality has become a necessity for maintaining social relationships. Even in April 2022, as mask mandates are being lifted to usher in a sense of normalcy despite the unrelenting waves of COVID-19 variants, virtual spaces linger and continue to accommodate needs of superseding time and space. Though the virtual spaces of social media platforms predate the COVID-19 pandemic, TikTok's quick rise in popularity during the pandemic establishes the platform as an integral component of the past two years. This rise in popularity was due in part to both TikTok's concise audiovisual content, the ability for participants to use sounds from other videos, and the platform's algorithmic distribution of content through the For You page.

The queer side of TikTok is one of many sides that use sounds to create a sense of mutual recognition and community: using particular sounds to share stories, memes, and representations of one's self. Through the observation of queer TikTok trends, it is apparent that sounds are also used to create virtual spaces for marginalized sexual and gender identities.

The question, "Do you listen to girl in red?" exemplifies queer modes of communication on the internet, using contextual and symbolic meanings to express identity and find community. Here, sound takes the form of a sonic question mark , placing not only the contextual information for each artist or music group in relation to the queer community, but the use of the sound itself at the center of these covert communications. Using sounds from music by girl in red, The Neighborhood, Frank Ocean, or any of the aforementioned music artists alongside visual, virtual performances on the TikTok platform allows people to express vulnerable and intimate aspects of their self-identity not by telling, but by showing.

Tallie Gabriel's poem "On Gender" spurred TikTok users who resonated with Gabriel's poem to use the audio in their own videos. In the conversation Gabriel shared with me, they revealed the vulnerability involved in the act of sharing their musings about their fluctuating gender identity. The performance of authenticity online is not only a commodifiable quality in online marketing and entertainment, it is an indicative quality of the queer community, where finding one another requires a certain degree of disclosure. Judith Butler's theory on the performative nature of gender underscores the weighted meaning of these virtual performances of queer identity. Performing gender and sexual identity online is a vulnerable act, but is necessary in order to establish and engage in community. In the context of TikTok's virtual space, sound operates as a coded language and a beacon within the queer community. TikTok provided a space where Gabriel could not only share their experiences and feelings, but others could use their creation to echo and express their own identities and experiences. In this way, we can understand girl in red TikTok performances as not expressions of identity, but the creation of identity; a highly stylized performance in which queerness is pronounced physically and virtually.

The broader context of the relational dynamic between sound and space places TikTok sounds as more than simply the background accompaniment to visual performances or symbolic references to identity. Judith Butler's definition of gender as stylized and repeated performative acts brings sound into an active role in the construction of online identity. Furthermore, the "girl in red" trend demonstrates the utilization of sound in order to create virtual space for queer individuals and communities, allowing for opportunities for members of the queer TikTok community to locate one another.

The Caroline Polachek dance trend is another example of a queer TikTok trend that pushed against stereotypical "straight" TikTok dance trends, a claiming of a social activity that was "for us." This trend also demonstrates an online contention with broader issues within the queer community as a whole, especially that of creating inclusive spaces for intersectional identities to exist. While the Caroline Polachek trend allows users to embody queer expressions and share in a communal and virtual experience, it also brushes up against the issue of notions of queerness being centered around whiteness. Black queer scholars have outlined a history of Black queer people being pushed out of queer spaces, both in person and online.

As a response, Black queer TikTokers have used sound to create spaces for Black queer identities. In these instances, Black queer people are called to use particular sounds to both create and occupy virtual space. This underlines not only sound's capacity to create space, but sound's capacity to make room for intersecting identities; to create space for identities that are marginalized in other spaces. As one TikToker stated in relaying a conversation with an acquaintance about inclusion in workplaces:

> They said that people who are not a part of minority groups have a completely different definition of inclusion than we do. They see it as allowing us to just exist in their space. They don't see it as creating room for us to coexist in a space that is ours. So when they create a cisgendered, straight, white space and they talk about inclusion, they're meaning people of color and queer people are allowed to be there, but they're not allowed to make it their space and they do not have the same right or equality in that space to exist as themselves. (@kay.1331, "My only other options were to lie or look homophobic and ignorant. It was a terrible experience. #queer #nonbinary #lgbtinclusive #inclusiveworkspaces", April 16, 2022.)

@kay.1331's conversation about inclusive spaces echoes what queer people of color have been saying for decades: being allowed in a space is not the same as sharing space.

As discussed in Chapter 1, current understandings of cyberspace suggest that our spaces are no longer relegated to being either physical or virtual. Virtual spaces have integrated into everyday life in such a way that blurs the boundaries between what is strictly real or digital. Cyberspace is a hybrid, ambiguous terrain, which allows for individuals to exist and to cultivate relationships and communities. Therefore, we can understand cyberspace as a prolific site for border communities; a space for individuals who share common multiple cultural identities to commune together.

On TikTok, Black queer individuals use their voices as not only an embodied performance of self, but as a means of creating a sonic virtual space through the digitization of their spoken or sung voice. In the context of Black queer TikTok spaces, Black queer TikTokers embody identities that exist in the borderlands. These identities are not to be mistaken as constituted of a fragment of parts, but rather as whole beings existing in the spaces between social and cultural borders. On TikTok, Black queer bodies occupy a space that is ambiguously located between the borders of physicality, virtuality: Blackness, and queerness. These exclusively Black queer spaces are created through the sounding of their voice, the sonic embodiment of an ever-transforming self.

The sounds of queer TikTok ultimately point to methods of creating virtual space for marginalized communities. If we are to truly understand the significance of these virtual, sonic borderlands, we need to pay attention to the nuances of intersectional queer identities. As Green stated, "We must listen for the fullness embedded in the silences and gaps, the moments of existence before the name or category came to do its work upon the body. We must be more

attuned to the present absences which calls for a Trans* method" (2016, 80). The Black queer sounds discussed in Chapter 2 demonstrate a need within the queer community to address the construction and maintenance of spaces that exclude queer people of color. This attention must be drawn to not only physical spaces, but virtual spaces in such a way that accounts for the growing presence of a hybrid cyberspace within our global culture.

This thesis has illuminated how participants in a social media platform use sound to create space, to make connections, to include and exclude in a specific marginalized community. It has demonstrated, through the methods and frameworks of ethnomusicology and sound studies, that TikTok sounds seed a fertile field for the study of identity construction and expression online.

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APPENDIX A. IRB LETTER

BGSU
BOWLING GREEN STATE UNIVERSITY

Office of Research Compliance

Institutional Review Board

DATE:	February 9, 2022
TO:	Ellen Messner
FROM:	Bowling Green State University Institutional Review Board
PROJECT TITLE:	[1843845-2] Master's Thesis
SUBMISSION TYPE:	Revision
ACTION:	APPROVED
APPROVAL DATE:	February 9, 2022
EXPIRATION DATE:	January 16, 2023
REVIEW TYPE:	Expedited Review
REVIEW CATEGORY:	Expedited review category # 7

Thank you for your submission of Revision materials for this project. The Bowling Green State University Institutional Review Board has APPROVED your submission. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a project design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

The final approved version of the consent document(s) is available as a published Board Document in the Review Details page. You must use the approved version of the consent document when obtaining consent from participants. Informed consent must continue throughout the project via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require that each participant receives a copy of the consent document.

Please note that you are responsible to conduct the study as approved by the IRB. If you seek to make any changes in your project activities or procedures, those modifications must be approved by this committee prior to initiation. Please use the modification request form for this procedure.

All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to this office. All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must also be reported promptly to this office.

This approval expires on January 16, 2023. You will receive a continuing review notice before your project expires. If you wish to continue your work after the expiration date, your documentation for continuing review must be received with sufficient time for review and continued approval before the expiration date.

If you have any questions, please contact the Institutional Review Board at 419-372-7716 or irb@bgsu.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this committee.

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