Why "Political"? Blackness and Queer Urban Geographies in Toronto and San Diego

SADIE HOCHMAN-RUIZ

Abstract: This article exhumes the spatial, political, and aesthetic origins of queer spaces. Queer activism seeks to reinvigorate a North American gay popular culture that became depoliticized following the gay liberation movement. Contemporarily, antiracism is considered essential for a space to be queer. However, both scholars and participants question whether queer spaces have made progress in that regard. Attention to the sonic foundations of punk, and the crucial role of queercore subculture in carving out queerness as a coalition of identities, reveals how queer spaces often generate the divisions along lines of race which they labour to solve.

Résumé : Cet article exhume les origines spatiales, politiques et esthétiques des espaces queer. L'activisme queer cherche à revivifier la culture populaire gay en Amérique du Nord, qui s'est dépolitisée à la suite du mouvement de libération gay. Aujourd'hui, l'antiracisme est considéré comme essentiel pour qu'un espace soit queer. Cependant, tant les universitaires que les participants se demandent si les espaces queer ont fait des progrès sur ce plan. Une attention portée aux fondations acoustiques du punk, et au rôle crucial de la subculture au cœur du caractère queer qui en fait une coalition d'identités, révèle comment les espaces queer génèrent souvent des divisions le long des lignes raciales qu'ils s'efforcent de supprimer.

Discourse at Denny's

It's after 1 a.m. and I'm sitting in a Denny's at a table for twelve with members of my extended drag family. We're celebrating Strawberry Corncakes's birthday. The night began with watching her perform at The Rail, one of the eight different venues that regularly host drag shows along a one-mile strip at the centre of San Diego's gaybourhood. Afterwards, we had gone out for drinks at a local bar frequented by San Diego's trans community, drunk-

Hochman-Ruiz, Sadie. 2021. Why "Political"? Blackness and Queer Urban Geographies in Toronto and San Diego. *MUSICultures* 48: 29-59.

enly arriving at our current location seeking late-night comfort food. One of Strawberry's friends, a plus-size burlesque dancer named Keena Buttah Love, asked me about my drag. Due to time constraints, that night I had done "quick mugs" with a friend and costume designer Arielle Conversi. I was a bit of a gender-fuck: I wore shorts with fishnets; I had none of the padding used

Strawberry Corncakes at Denny's on El Cajon Blvd. Photo by author.

to create the illusion of a feminine figure; I had my eyes and lips done but no foundation or contour; I sported dangly earrings with a bald head. Strawberry answered Keena before I could. She said that my drag is more "queer" whereas her drag is more "LGBT." The difference between the two is that mine is more "political." I didn't want to contradict the birthday girl, so all I added were some details about my recent projects. Ironically, I had always viewed Strawberry's work as being very political. The show she was organizing, *The Gig*, gathered all the African-American drag queens in San Diego. When she was still working out the details, Strawberry told me how frustrating it was that so few of the Black queens get to work together. Prior to our late night discourse at Denny's, she confided in me many times about how hard it is living (and, especially, dating) while Black and transgender; against the recent mobilization of the far-right in Trump's America, the creation of safe spaces for people of colour has taken on a political urgency. Wouldn't that be enough for her to have recognized the political import of her work in that moment? (When I later followed up with Strawberry, she agreed that her show and work is political — but only after prompting her with the sharp distinction she had crafted on that night, as well as the concerns it had generated for me). Particularly because I have never used the word "political" to describe my own work, I went home that night thinking about what it takes to have one's work resonate as "political."

I expect to hear the word "political" in descriptions of queer performances. José Esteban Muñoz describes queer performance as facilitating "modes of belonging, especially minoritarian belonging" (2009: 99). Queer performance critiques social asymmetries in a growingly visible LGBT community by staging desire that resists gender normativity, sexual normativity, and other intersecting forms of normativity (e.g. racial and national fantasy, the nuclear family) which maintain heterosexuality's hegemonic position in American culture.[1] Muñoz draws parallels between queer and punk performance, both of which use populism, amateurism, and destruction to "imagine a time and a place where their desires are not toxic" (2009: 105). The connections are more than just sympathetic, they are genealogical. Queerness tethers to punk through subcultural fashion and art-making as formative influences on the intellectual history of queer theory. Queercore, a zine-based mid-1980s Toronto sound subculture that concerned itself with re-radicalizing LGBT art and activism, had mobilized the term "queer" in opposition to assimilationist gay and lesbian identities. The work of these subcultural art-makers laid the foundation for scholars to later theorize queerness as political and resistant.

Cities and urban geography are pivotal backdrops against which many queers come to learn the social meanings attached to their identity. Catherine

Jean Nash and Alison Bain argue that sexual identities are rehearsed spatially through the claiming of space, that the rehearsing of queerness emerges in specific spaces that allow its inhabitants to resist hegemonic gay and lesbian identities (2007: 50). San Diego's queer community shares members and spaces with San Diego's local scenes dedicated to avant-garde arts and grassroots political activism. That is queercore's legacy. The queer community's central infrastructure is widely dispersed and scattered around the city. There is a community centre (in addition to a larger LGBT centre), a small number of socially conscious businesses, and artist work-spaces. Compared with queer spaces, LGBT spaces are much more developed and centralized, and are thus easier to both find and access. Hillcrest has been the centre of San Diego's gay and lesbian nightlife since the 1970s. Gay business owners revived the neighbourhood from economic stagnation by opening a strip of bars and clubs for patrons seeking refuge from homophobic persecution (Dillinger 2000). The density of Hillcrest's nightlife continues to draw large crowds. Even as their patrons have expanded well beyond the LGBT community, the symbolic power of the gaybourhood remains of political importance in assuring the safety of gender and sexual minorities. But from a queer perspective, the capitalist aims of these institutions mar the political function they perform.

Strawberry called on distinctions of "queer" and of "LGBT" to categorize my art, even though we had never before talked of our work in those terms. The modalities of knowing and belonging that steered this moment of differentiation were unspoken and embodied. Even as our conversation achieved a moderate clarity when attaching to these terms, I sensed they signalled other, much more basic modes of being and self-understanding. Identity-based clues coloured the way I received Strawberry's comments. Contextually, I felt I was being singled out as "queer" in ways that marked my whiteness and class privilege. When Strawberry situates her art as belonging within the LGBT community, she implicates, by contrast, the white privilege and classism that has been problematic amongst queer activists and artists (Cohen 1997: 440; Muñoz 1997: 80-2). But LGBT spaces also have a complicated relationship with anti-racist politics. Hillcrest is an apolitical space that hardly challenges hegemonic structures of white supremacy. The neighbourhood entered its phase of urban renewal through the efforts of white, middle-class gays, whose politically moderate views are well documented (Dillinger 2000). Even while advocating for social change, their political and economic agenda has been steered by pragmatism and the desire to be ordinary. Muñoz calls these "antiutopian wishes" (2009: 21). Hillcrest was built to secure a social recognition for the gay community that could only be aided by the success of Hillcrest's entrepreneurial class, even

as it expedites gentrification and the displacement of the neighbourhood's poorer communities. The fact that so many of the performers are African-American and Latinx illustrates a division of labour that disproportionately places people of colour (POC) in precarious positions of employment: jobs with inconsistent hours, no security, and that require tireless self-promotion. Queer people of colour (QPOC) continue to feel alienated even as they open up spaces of belonging in Hillcrest.

The double bind of conditional (and, often, exploitative) acceptance generates strong affects. Rage has been investigated by scholars of Black Studies, for its use by psychologists, in literature, and as legal defence (Harris 1997: 6). Black rage forwards that racial oppression can alter one's mental state, driving one to act out of the ordinary. While at times the intellectual history of Black rage has been troubling — especially when validating the stereotype of the angry Black man — other scholars have celebrated rage for its emancipatory potential and as a means of political organization. Bryan J. McCann places rage at the centre of an affective politics in his work on hip-hop. He defines Black rage as an affective register that is both presocial (unrestricted by locators such as race, class, and gender) and also generates sympathies between Black subjects who can understand the struggle to navigate the empowering aspects of musical capital as it generates value only within the limited social and economic sphere of white supremacist capitalism (2013: 415). Susan Stryker similarly identifies rage as the affective result of transgender subjects struggling with the oppressive aspects of gendered embodiment. Transgender people take up gender "for the sake of survival as a subject" but, in that action, one "precipitates one's exclusion from a naturalized order of existence that seeks to maintain itself as the only possible basis for being a subject" (1994: 249). The queercore movement reclaimed and invested the term "queer" with rage, resistance, and refusal. Its written and sonic language is angry, profanely lashing out as a critique of normativity. Today, white queer and QPOC people band together in a coalition of marginalized identities to make art which generates sympathetic affects and productive hostilities.

Now that white queer and QPOC people are more often sharing space, the racial politics of queer rage is increasingly dramatizing intra-community relationships. Christopher Small's work in *Musicking* instructs that, when sound anchors a complex web of social relationships, the performance event acts as a container for this assortment of interactions and affects (1998: 13). Events that centre QPOC performers like the concerts of queer rapper Mykki Blanco have precipitated a shift in racial demographics and expanded the kinds of social relationships which form queer spaces. By virtue of being present, QPOC participants help in actualizing the political aspirations of

the audience. Queer events are diversifying and now further representing radical marginality in all its manifestations. Small argues each subject is transformed through the musical event as social and political beings, acting out their relationships with the other participants. The music event is one where people go "to be seen," to have others view them through the lens of the event (1998: 23). But, the intimacies engendered by this directed gaze and its desire to know race better create a burden for QPOC. Even as the queer space empowers QPOC to challenge how gender and sexual normativity localize on their body, the space also demands their participation in a collective project of absolving the guilt of white queer participants by affirming the performance space as anti-racist. I approach this tension with a spirit of inquiry borrowed from *Musicking*. Small's writing adopts a variety of subject positions, reminding that the sum of "all these different activities add up to a single event (10)." This article explores from a variety of perspectives — mainly my own and Strawberry's — the racial tensions which undergird the musicking relationships that have emerged in contemporary LGBT and queer spaces.

Queercore also presents a limit case for musicking. Given the importance Small places on the appearance of musical performance as the container for social relations, can we engage in musicking without music present? Is it possible for sound to anchor social relationships and transform subjects even when it is not physically present? The seminal queercore scene in Toronto originated in the fanzine *J.D.s* (1984-1991). Page by page, the reader flipped through scenes from places that never existed; where the punks were all queer and cruising the mosh pit. The result is a world of

Sadie Hochman-Ruiz and Arielle Conversi at trans bar SRO. Photo by author.

musicking. Music inspires the attitude and look of the zine itself. Even in the absence of a soundtrack, punk musical style orchestrates the pornographic fan fiction and BDSM comics which grace the zine's other pages. The zine creators crafted a hostile, anti-assimilationist aesthetic language that piqued the interest of a diverse group of queer outcasts (du Plessis and Chapman 1997: 48). Gestures of "angry, parody and camp" represented a move "beyond the illegibility of object choice" in response to a shallow and anti-utopian identity politics (Berlant and Freeman 1992: 180). The path queercore took to become the music scene it is today went through an equally imaginative and aspirational world of scholarly theorizing, wherein queercore's formulation of coalitional politics would be repeatedly challenged and expanded. As the bulk of its theorizing migrated from a punk zine to scholarly journals and monographs, we might ask if scholarship too ought count as a world of musicking? Are the various ways in which scholars of queer theory break down and critique gender and sexual normativity indebted to a thinking of anti-identity first formulated through punk sound? The parallels Muñoz draws between punk's utopian desires and queer politics suggests so (2009: 105). Elliott Powell makes the case that Cathy J. Cohen's critique of the queer community's whiteness in "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens" has a soundtrack as well (2019: 189).

Reflecting on my period as an artist-researcher in San Diego, I continue to work with a set of questions that I have inherited. How is the act of theoretical critique indebted to artistic labour? Could an approach to music scholarship which better considers artistic and theoretical labour as equals better foreground the voices of those marginal to the world of research but central to the world of performance? As Small argues, "[e]veryone, whether aware of it or not, has what we can loosely call a theory of musicking" (1998: 13). What geographies emerge from different people's theories of musicking? What of the artists, like myself, who perform in punk/DIY spaces and in the gaybourhood? Is the sense of directionality I have as an artist different than the one I have as a scholar? Or, can a sense of direction lead you to more than one place? Especially on the topic of anti-racism, I have never felt as pulled in different directions. Queercore and queer activism's DIY aesthetics (sound, in particular) and politics carried an unmarked whiteness which generate the very divisions of race and class that they attempt to solve. This article applies an ambulatory mode of thinking, or a thinking on one's feet. I consider why I and others move in the ways that we do. What drives the intentionality behind each step? When theorizing has you caught in double-binds and contradictions, can we learn from the people who keep moving in search of answers?

Don't Be Gay, or, How I Learned To Be Queer and Navigate Toronto

G.B. Jones and Bruce LaBruce penned "Don't Be Gay, or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Fuck Punk Up the Ass" for a 1989 special issue of *Maximum Rocknroll* on sexuality.[2] The article stands out as a high-theory manifesto for the queercore movement, written by its originators. They argue that queercore is necessary because the gay establishment has been "co-opted":

> Under the headings of "democracy," "pluralism," and "liberalism," society presents each 'radical subculture' as one of several alternatives, albeit more 'theatrical,' in an array of 'lifestyles' to choose from. (Jones and LaBruce 1989)

Gay liberation, the authors complain, had become just another radical lifestyle choice that liberal capitalism encourages its subjects to buy into: "[A] facile freedom that offers gay bars, discos, and fashion within a 'gay ghetto,' a radical option sanctioned by and contained within normalcy … the only concession to liberation" (Jones and LaBruce 1989). Jones and LaBruce argue that capitalism has driven these changes. In the essay, the authors mourn the loss of gay subculture, the closed networks that had facilitated exchanges both economic and sexual. The manifesto presents the movement as a response to the growing, consumerist gay identity and its classist normative prescriptions. The authors react to a market all too eager to cater to gay desires, and a gay liberation leadership unable to recognize the cost of their complicity. Jones and LaBruce turn to punk as a way to educate the reader about the follies of neglecting subculture. Punk already taught us the ills of capitalism: how capitalism puppeteers identity by organizing gender and sexuality around statist objectives. "Don't Be Gay" calls for intervention and hopes it is not too late.

Jones and LaBruce began working together in the mid-80s. By that time, the previous generation of LGBT community leaders had fought for a better relationship with governments, businesses, and police. So much so that LaBruce and Jones felt the need to cry *sell-out*. The authors reacted to the growth of Toronto's gaybourhood, the Church-Wellesley Village. Middle-class gays had newly become visible through the gay liberation movement of the 1970s. Prior to the gay liberation movement, gay life was strictly subcultural and hidden. Against a shifting social climate and the growth of a consumer industry focused on gays as a niche market, entrepreneurs began to

place priority on establishing more visible neighbourhoods for middle-class patrons to experience restaurants, clubs, and romance.[3] Quite often these were the same neighbourhoods where subcultural networks had once existed. Church-Wellesley already housed key bars and bathhouses, and had a history of "cruising" that can be traced back to the early 19th century (Jackson 2017: 91). Because business owners built this neighbourhood on a once-subcultural space, a particular demographic homogeneity already existed among the people who lived there. Leading up to the 1970s, one-person households dominated the area — 86% in the gay-village-to-be compared to the 40% average for Toronto (Ornstein and McCaskell 2017: 66-67). Business development only further congealed Church-Wellesley's identity as a gay neighbourhood. Two of Toronto's first high-rise apartments were established in this neighbourhood, and were popular with gay men because they offered chic, compact living spaces surrounded by a growing nightlife (Velasco 2013).

LaBruce and Jones deride these "gay ghettoes," uninterested in having their community woven into the cosmopolitan quilt of city-life (Jones and LaBruce 1989). Canada was becoming more multicultural in the 1970s. Just as the federal government began to openly embrace multiculturalism as official policy, vectors of migration newly opened from African and Asian countries.[4] Toronto was heavily impacted by these trends.[5] Multicultural nooks grew in size through the city's expanding and diversifying population (Troper 2003: 58-9). Immigrant entrepreneurs did the labour of urban renewal by revitalizing abandoned parts of the city, buying up land with little value to grow family-friendly neighbourhoods around local businesses. The coming-out movement happened alongside this era of liberalization, and it was hard not to experience the diversification of the city as attached to political change. Historian Harold Troper, even amidst his frightening nostalgia for a Toronto pre-mass immigration, acknowledges an optimism that sat behind the shift in who was understood to possess political power:

> Put simply, by the late 1960s, the past was cut loose, made dysfunctional both by the onslaught of city-bound immigration and the mediating force of governments awakened to the fact that political power was increasingly in the hands of a new and pluralist urban electorate that was made up more and more of immigrants and their children. (Troper 2003: 35)

Due to the timing of gay liberation, Church-Wellesley participated in this movement toward liberal reform. The Church-Wellesley gaybourhood claimed physical space and then leveraged that into social recognition and

political purchase, mirroring the labour that had established Toronto's ethnic enclaves.

For many, Church-Wellesley was an obvious choice to be the centre of Toronto's gay community. For a minority, however, the focus on Church-Wellesley was something to be contested. By the end of the 1970s, the gaybourhood had grown older, more financially secure, and decisively more male (Ornstein and McCaskell 2017: 66-67). A coalition of radical activists and experimental artists were migrating toward the southwest of the city, closer to the Ontario College of Art (Farrow and Lorinc 2017: 150). This social grouping derided the gay "ghetto," as they too had called it, because many of the taverns were straight-owned and were seen as taking advantage of their gay clientele (Winsa 2015). Toronto's lesbian community was also scarcely found on Church Street, but this was not necessarily a division of politics. Lesbian nightlife was always much more decentralized than gay nightlife given the violence faced by women who move throughout the city without the company of men (see Nash and Bain [2007] for more information on the ephemerality and hiddenness of lesbian geographies). Political radicals, women, and art-freaks made up an undefined remainder from the gay liberation movement. LaBruce and Jones labelled these outcasts "queers." The term was by no means new and neither was its celebratory usage unique, but the gentrification of Church-Wellesley made urgent an alternative to gay identity. "Queer" assumed this critical position and then began a second etymological life. When LaBruce and Jones first used the term "queer," it was made to separate their community from the depoliticized gaybourhood. For queers, the search for belonging was only problematized by the stability and social recognition that an official neighbourhood offered. Queercore's co-founders recognized that social power had become more deeply entangled with the task of managing difference. In a moment of political change driven by a diversifying electorate, queercore critiqued the terms by which visibility and validation were offered. Queer politics rested on a transformational coalition of invisible subjects. They knew first-hand that the new political order was not inclusive for all; they had experienced alienation and confusion even as the new gaybourhood hailed them and said *this place is for you*.

The early punk movement guided queercore to break down the gaybourhood's androcentricity and connect this deviance with a class politics. The movement functioned as an archive for gender deviants and sexual radicals — "a collective of fags, dykes and other fuck-ups dedicated to the task of putting the 'gay' back in 'punk' and the 'punk' back in 'gay'" (Jones and LaBruce 1989). In escaping the congealing of gay identity within statist priorities, queercore engaged in a nostalgia project. Queercore wondered

what the punk movement might be like if it remembered its radical gender politics the way that they do:

> [Becoming sexual outlaws] was *the* point of identification for the early "punk rockers" who emerged in the mid-seventies, explicitly playing out the role of "the punk" in dress, attitude, and the rejection of social norms. (Jones and LaBruce 1989; emphasis in original)

The term "punk" had originated in prison slang. It was a complicated intersection of classed, gendered, and sexualized meanings. The punk was a catamite, a feminized figure in an all-male relationship that took place within a space reserved for a criminal underclass (McNeil and McCain 1996: 208). For LaBruce and Jones, to dress and live punk was a kink-positive, anti-misogynistic, and anti-social statement. It celebrated identity by refusing to blend in. To revive the arty androgyny of punk subculture in the late-1970s would foreground what the gay liberation movement critically had left behind.[6] In their zine *J.D.s*, LaBruce and Jones use snarky humour and help their audience imagine and remember punk the way they do. They place half-nude pictures of punk waifs next to fantastical stories of cruising with sexually ambiguous hardcore kids. In their words, *J.D.s* is "a gay softcore fanzine for punks" (Jones and LaBruce 1989). The authors add a critique of punk which presents queercore's intervention as doubly urgent. In "Don't Be Gay," Jones and LaBruce explain that the punk movement had also sold-out, succumbed to normativity, and had been usurped by homophobia and male scopophilia (Jones and LaBruce 1989). Punk needed to be saved, not just for its own sake, but to keep possible a queer critique of society. Through the artistic labour of zine-creation, queercore willed a new (even if imaginary) space for gays and lesbians where the rules of the gaybourhood would not apply.[7]

J.D.s' humorous takedown of gay normativity laid the groundwork for queer theory in the 1990s, an intellectual movement that hoped to shake up the academy. Teresa de Lauretis, professor of the History of Consciousness at UC Santa Cruz and researcher focused on feminism and postmodernism, first paired the terms "queer" and "theory" as a joke to title a 1989 academic conference presentation (Halperin 2003: 339). She had heard the word "queer" being used in an affirmative sense by "activists, street kids and members of the art world" (Halperin 2003: 339). Though de Lauretis seems unsure whom exactly to credit, her references to artists and subcultural participants would eventually connect back to Toronto queercore — likely routing her through one of Jones and LaBruce's transnational connections. Perhaps, given that

de Lauretis is based in Santa Cruz, she experienced queer art through Tom Jennings and Deke Nihilson, who were inspired to publish San Francisco's *Homocore* zine after getting a copy of *J.D.s*. De Lauretis draws on queercore's politics and style. She "intended the title [queer theory] as a provocation," wanting "specifically to unsettle the complacency of 'lesbian and gay studies' … and to offer a possible escape from the hegemony of white, male, middle-class models of analysis" (Halperin 2003: 339).

Queer theory was a response to crisis. The contours of that crisis and its response — diversification, normalization, revolution — are similar to those that had driven the essay "Don't Be Gay." Over the course of the coming-out movement, gays and lesbians became understandably more visible in academia. During that period, more than just sexual minorities pushed to diversify the academy. Anti-colonial, Black liberation, and feminist social movements sparked the creation of interdisciplinary fields which would explore marginalized subjectivity and offer the academy internal critique. In this context, gay and lesbian scholars fought for their own field where the goal was to claim agency in documenting the existence and struggle of gay and lesbian populations. By creating space for themselves on these terms, however, foundational gay and lesbian scholarship did not explore issues of race or gender that were being taken up by their sister movements (Ferguson 2012: 217). When neglecting these intersectional connections, queer scholars felt gay and lesbian studies had capitulated to an antiquated order — it was a reorder of things, as Roderick Ferguson (2012) puts it. Ferguson shows how, throughout the 1970s the academy had become an efficient mechanism for absorbing diverse populations and affording them representation (2012: 217). Like the increasingly cosmopolitan map of Toronto, gay and lesbian studies had neatly organized diversity into liberal, equitable, one-issue fields. Queer theory borrowed *J.D.s*' nihilistic rebuke of celebratory identity politics in order to say *this progress wasn't enough* and *we can do better*. Queercore's questions about normativity fit within a diversifying academy that needed another push. Queer theory built on the intervention of queercore to foster radical coalition-making, reintroduce questions of gender, and support non-normative sexualities.

I narrate this history intersecting the history of queercore subculture with a history of Canadian immigration. The *J.D.s* era portends the slow and difficult process by which queer scholars would need to question how to foster radical coalitions with QPOC. Though "Don't Be Gay" is silent on the growing whiteness of the Church-Wellesley neighbourhood, the call to refuse normativity resonates with those who find themselves outside of an increasingly disciplined, consumerist gay and lesbian identity. The work of

scholars like Muñoz (1997) or Cohen (1997) show queer-of-colour critique has always been present in queer identity as a potential, in the possibility that someone might tease these ideas out. For Muñoz, the use of "we" in queer writing addresses a "future society that is being invoked and addressed at the same moment" (2009: 20). "Don't Be Gay" states "*we* are expected" to follow and accept the dominant ideology of the gay movement as inevitable (Jones and LaBruce 1989, emphasis added). Writing, for Muñoz, is a performance that unlocks modes of feeling together. It hails all who imagine themselves as welcomed in this futuristic society — *we*, the outcasts.

My present research in San Diego confirms that the queer "we" sometimes works in paradoxical ways. Lauren Berlant and Elizabeth Freeman identify the paradox of queer identity in the way it "*exploits* internal difference," it "refuses closeting strategies of assimilation and goes for the broadest and most explicit assertion of presence" (1997: 151). My experience of queer space in San Diego has suggested the way queerness exploits racial difference and, more specifically, how it might be connected to the fetishization of alterity that runs adjacent to histories of colonialism and imperialism. These forces, led by desire, complicate San Diego's urban sexual geography. It's hard figure out where QPOC fall into a partitioning of a queer "we" and a straight "them," even as QPOC often rely on queer spaces for safety in navigating the city. In the following section, I turn to sound as one mode in which queerness is performed. Punk sound's fetishistic racial politics historicizes *J.D.s'* inattention to whiteness in queercore's critique of gay assimilation. Punk sound differently orients bodies within queer spaces, pointing them elsewhere in the way it encloses ideas about race, sexuality, and belonging.

Black Sound, No Skin

> Subcultures are a mass of contradictions. Though they may be at times tied to a particular kind of politics, that alliance is uneven and transitory.… Real skins are much less coherent than the stereotype. Subcultures, after all, don't offer solutions to material problems. They play back the problems symbolically, in style. And style alone cannot bridge the gap between contradictory responses.
>
> — Bruce LaBruce voiceover, *No Skin Off My Ass*

If we listen to the film soundtracks of queercore co-founder Bruce LaBruce, the sounds through which he articulates his critique of gay classism, we

witness people of colour being ghosted into his writing and films. I borrow from Roderick Ferguson to materialize the ghostly presence of non-European migrant workers in British punk. Ferguson rereads Marx's work on capitalist surplus value, minding Marx's inattentiveness to how the devaluation of working-class labour interacts with slavery and the migration of racialized ethnic minorities (2004: 13). By the time punk arrived in the late-1970s as a commentary on capitalism in decline, non-white labouring bodies were deeply implicated as the human surplus (what Ferguson calls "surplus population" [2004: 15]) that accompanied capitalism's international expansion and the displacement of the working-class: "both superfluous and indispensable, surplus populations fulfill *and* exceed the demands of capital"; these populations "always exist as future labourers for capital," "always ready for exploitation" (Ferguson 2004: 15). Not only did British punk lean into these racial tensions, but it also played with a longstanding trope of citing gender and sexual chaos to discipline these diverse populations into assimilation. In flaunting their own sexual deviance, punks and queers celebrate the violent repression that was most intensely directed toward racialized ethnic minorities.

Ferguson's work on Marx is more impactful in a study of sound if it is put into dialogue with music scholarship. Ferguson's key points intersect with Dick Hebidge's *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (2002 [1979]). Building a dialogue with Hebidge's work clamps down Ferguson's wide historical archive with a strict focus on British youth subcultures in the post-war era. Hebidge invests in punk's populist "cut-ups" the same deviant significations of British working-class subculture, both to be "read … as a white 'translation' of black 'ethnicity'" (64). Ferguson traces fears of working-class debauchery to the early expansion of the labour force in the 19th century when working-class women (white women), newly bestowed with economic mobility, had displayed a desire for ribbons, lace, and silk. Middle-class observers interpreted this nascent consumerism as the sign "of awakening sexual appetites" and an "unrestrained id" (Ferguson 2004: 8-9). The working-class, both men and women, would become the subject of spectacle, with reports of their licentiousness spread to pathologize their sexuality (9). British youth subcultures (mods, skins, teds, etc.) are a testament to how central fashion would remain in conjuring these anxieties: punk "provided the tabloids with a fund of predictably sensational copy … reproduc[ing] the entire sartorial history of post-war working-class youth cultures in 'cut up' form" (Hebidge 2002 [1979]: 26). In many cases, the fear of working-class promiscuity, engendered by ostentatious fashion, intersected directly with "racial mythologies about [non-white populations'] supposedly abnormal reproductive capacities and outcomes" (Ferguson 2004: 9). Hebidge is insistent on this point, arguing that the anxieties

leading into the punk movement were explicitly "about the effects of [B]lack immigration on employment, housing and … 'quality of life'" (2002 [1979]: 81). Caribbean migrants in Britain had increased from 17,000 in 1951 to 269,000 in 1966, triggering a right-wing backlash that would last throughout the 1970s (Foner 2009: 4). The decolonization of Jamaica, in particular, and the migrant workers who left the island in search of work in Britain became the immediate carriers of old tropes concerning the sexual pathologies of the working-class. In the case of the skinhead, punk's most "lumpen" precursor, the clothing "simultaneously embodied both [the cultures of West Indian immigrants and the white working class]" through a "clean-cut, neatly pressed delinquent look" (Hebidge 2002 [1979]: 56).

In the late 1970s, the far-right National Front infiltrated England's skinhead subculture in cities with large working-class communities. The far-right made efforts to mobilize a youth movement, hoping to parallel the left's generational shift and its swelling membership. Young people of the 60s and 70s responded to youthful leaders on the left who paid attention to popular culture and music. The far-right saw punk, a music which preached apocalypse and flirted with fascist imagery, as an opportunity to mimic this process. Punk spoke to white, working-class youth, many of whom had felt alienated by the left's ongoing "cultural turn" which emphasized race, gender, and sexuality. The National Front fostered "an aggressive image that simultaneously reconciled territorial loyalties and socio-economic concerns with racial identity and a sense of purpose" (Copsey and Worley 2016: 34). The hope was to attract a mass movement of teens, using the "skinhead image … to embody the imagined persona of the young white nationalist" (Copsey and Worley 2016: 42). But the National Front's efforts to grow their membership were mostly unsuccessful. As punk, 2-tone ska, and Oi! were each claimed by the far-right, such claims were "resisted, countered and overwhelmed" and "the far-right necessarily constructed its own variant of punk/Oi!, reconfiguring the skinhead image into a recognizable but distinct sub-sect of broader subculture and establishing alternative networks of communication" (Copsey and Worley 2016: 42).

Bruce LaBruce reanimates the skinhead in Toronto as a vehicle for parody with more than a decade of distance from the peak of the original. The skinhead's titular role in *No Skin Off My Ass* (1991, dir. Bruce LaBruce) brings out all the complexities that had befallen this subcultural figure. Hebidge only catalogues the early-70s moment of British skinhead subculture, in which the skins' efforts to recover working-class community were articulated through their interaction with Jamaican youths (copying their dress, their style, their curses, and listening to their music). *No Skin Off My Ass* deals with the late-

70s skinhead and his machismo, which LaBruce introduces to parody punk subculture's growing heteronormativity. Neo-fascists primed the skinhead for this kind of intervention. The "sense of purpose" the skinhead would provide to working-class youth was partially rooted in affirming a conception of masculinity that demands a binary and heteronormative thinking of gender. Punk's refusal of sexual normativity had become increasingly steered by normative, masculinist desire. Women were being mistreated if they were not conventionally sexy or girlish and available to date, and gay sexuality was being performed as a disgusting act to repel mainstream audiences (Jones and LaBruce 1989). The skinhead's connection to neofascist xenophobia allows LaBruce to exploit its regressive political image as it assaults a multiplicity of marginalized subjects.

No Skin Off My Ass tells the story of a gay hairdresser in early-1990s Toronto and his forbidden, homosexual love for a skinhead. The skinhead is played by Klaus von Brücker, the queercore pseudonym of LaBruce's then-boyfriend Nicholas Davies. The parody of a Germanic name is a heavy-handed reference to the far-right's racialized conception of Europeanness. LaBruce plays the hairdresser as a haughty femme, with a breathy, lilting speaking voice and impeccable diction. LaBruce strikes up a sexual relationship with the skinhead whose sexual identification is kept mysterious. The plot unfolds and suggests the skinhead might be playing gay to con the hairdresser. Bell et al. argue the parodic hyper-masculinity of the gay skinhead evokes a nostalgia for the era of street cruising and promiscuity. The gay skinhead resexualizes gay men's bodies in an era when the accelerated acceptance of gay communities hinged on the privatization of sex (Bell et al. 1994: 35-6). LaBruce ends *No Skin Off My Ass* with a long sex scene. He queers the skinhead thereby disarming his aggressive, white heteromasculinity.

Parody pervades *No Skin Off My Ass*, which, as LaBruce's film-buff audience would know, is a spoof of Robert Altman's thriller *That Cold Day in The Park* (1969). The character sketches are derived from the Altman original. In *That Cold Day*, Michael Burns plays 'the boy,' a mute hippie who takes advantage of Frances Austen (played by Sandy Dennis). Austen shelters the mute boy from the rain only to find she is being hustled. She follows him to discover he is neither mute, nor homeless. Because of this, his affection is proven (at least to Austen) to be untrue, and her broken heart eventually leads her to murder. LaBruce mimes Austen's creepy behaviour. He bathes the skinhead, just like Austen bathes the boy. Austen plays into every misogynistic caricature one can imagine: she plays the old, frigid woman with her hair in a tight bun, unable to land a husband; she plays the baby-crazy lunatic, imprisoning the boy in her guest room so that she can have a child; she plays

the jealous girlfriend, entrapping the boy by hiring a prostitute to confirm her worst fears. Her character is solely motivated by things she needs from men (love, sex, fidelity). The character sketch gives LaBruce plenty of material to act as a femme foil and to queer the skinhead's masculinity.

Sound deepens LaBruce's parody. The opening credits of *No Skin Off My Ass* are set to "Fred's Song" by Beefeater, a quiet but jaunty acoustic number with the refrain "skinhead guys just turn me on." Beefeater are a D.C. based hardcore punk band from the mid-80s. The hardcore scene was founded through quickened tempos and increased volume. Meaning, "Fred's Song" itself is ironic in tone, which plays into the film's insistent parody of the Altman original, of punk subculture, and of a modern gay identity. After introducing a distinct musical score, LaBruce toys with *That Cold Day In The Park*'s soundtrack. *That Cold Day*'s soundtrack was written by jazz composer Johnny Mandel, steered by a quiet and ominous collection of winds intermixed with sparse, open chords on the piano. LaBruce reuses snippets of this score, lifted with poor audio quality. This wind ensemble texture becomes thematic material that accompanies LaBruce's character as non-diegetic sound. It soundtracks LaBruce's darkest depression and his utter inability to feel erotic desire. Sound snippets from *That Cold Day In The Park* are contrasted with electric guitar noise and snippets of punk songs. The latter are paired with the skinhead and his lesbian rebel sister played by G.B. Jones. The soundtrack follows the cuts in the film. Sometimes a texture will be heard for only a few seconds. Concept drives the soundtrack more than coherence.

Close attention paid to sound instructs how the relationship between LaBruce and von Brücker is staked on burying and resignifying the racial tensions that animated the British punk movement. In one scene, LaBruce coyly leans over a cassette player and tells von Brücker: "I'm taking a musical appreciation course. I try to listen to at least one hour of music every day." The scene is deeply ironic, given that LaBruce understands himself to be a connoisseur of punk and had, at that point, founded a subgenre of punk music rooted in a painstaking archivalism (each issue of *J.D.s* includes a growing discography of hard-to-find punk records with queer lyrical material titled the "Homocore Hit Parade"). The bourgeois nature of music appreciation lessons adds another dimension to queercore's parody of the gay middle-class. LaBruce, playing the wannabe punk, uses these lessons in a misguided attempt to search for meaning amidst workplace alienation. Highlighting the hairdresser's femme qualities, LaBruce pops in a cassette of Fran Jeffries "Sex and the Single Girl."[8] Von Brücker is clearly uninterested and grabs a cassette from his jacket pocket. He puts on Operation Ivy's punk-ska cover of "These Boots Were Made For Walking" by Nancy Sinatra (titled "One of

These Days" by Operation Ivy on *Energy* [Lookout! Records, 1989]). At a blistering 175 beats per minute, the guitarist executes ska's iconic "skank" rhythm. Guitar chords are played on the off-beats with upstrokes to accent the higher-registers of the instrument.

Ska, a Jamaican style, fuzes Afro-Latin, African, and African American influences into its unique rhythm.[9] Originally, the music was a moderate tempo, danceable and popular in Jamaica. The music sped up when migrating to Britain and hybridizing with punk, the resultant sound becoming 2-tone. Ska landed in Coventry, England, an important hub of automotive manufacturing and production that had welcomed a large number of Caribbean migrant workers. Ska soundtracked a hybrid culture in a cosmopolitan city. During the 2-tone movement, ska bands changed in demographic, functioning as a space of collaboration for Black and white musicians. Skinheads, once only fans of ska music, increasingly became involved as performers. Hebdige works through the demise of a coalition between white working-class Brits and Jamaican immigrants, which he characterizes as always "extremely precarious and provisional" (2002 [1979]: 58). Skins had turned to the raw, energetic, and aggressive sounds of early ska, hoping to reconnect their severed relationship with a working-class community and, by extension, masculinity (58). Dressing, talking, and dancing like rude boys was a method of embodying the marginalized and policed hyper-masculinity of the Black migrant worker. But the skins' sense of working-class community was fractured by less tangible changes than a fictitious attack on masculinity. Working-class communities evaporated through the myth of classlessness, the privatization of space, and gentrification (58). The inability to effect political change and continued fascination with the sound culture led to contradictory results — like a small pocket of neofascist ska fans who listened to the only all-white band Madness (Reynolds 2005: 236). As LaBruce notes in a voiceover, subcultures don't offer solutions to material problems. They just play them back in style.

"One of These Days" compresses into sound the history of skinhead subculture and the drama of cross-racial contact in British working-class communities. It is an important history of the skinhead look that Bell et al.'s study on London's gay skinheads never addresses (1994). An attentive ear can decipher an approximation of a guitar hitting the off-beat, even despite Tim Armstrong's sloppy technique. The whitewashed versioning of the skank rhythm makes audible the contestations through which the skinhead's look evolved: from a copy of Jamaican style to a neofascist imagining of socio-economic minoritization. Operation Ivy's politics are left-leaning and are in no way affiliated to any far-right musical movements. However, the band is significantly less musically sophisticated than earlier interracial ska

groups (The Specials, The Selector, The Bodysnatchers, for example). Punk amateurism had become racially coded following the suburban hardcore movement in the United States and Canada, which was significantly whiter than its urban predecessor. Located in the greater Bay Area, Operation Ivy are more immediately affiliated with the hardcore movement than 2-tone ska. They collectively yell the lyrics into the microphone with no attention to melody, which would never happen in a 2-tone ska record. These musical knowledges pertaining to sub-genre register with avid punk listeners. *No Skin Off My Ass* queers ska and skanking only by hiding this tense and complicated history of cross-racial identification.

In the late-1990s, queer-of-colour critique began writing of a difficulty activists experience in translating from theory to practice queer culture's expansive understanding of who belongs to their spaces. Cathy J. Cohen's 1997 *GLQ* essay "Punks, Bulldaggers and Welfare Queens" checks in on countercultural queer activism and its difficulties addressing racism. She commends "*theoretical conceptualizations* (emphasis in original)" of queerness for their attention to intersectionality but wonders why activist groups like Queer Nation and ACT-UP have trouble materializing these alliances (Cohen 1997: 440). Cohen ultimately cycles back to the theorization of queerness itself, arguing queerness preaches multiplicity — that sexuality cannot be understood apart from citizenship, class, gender, ethnicity, etc. — but thinks of power as a single-issue phenomenon: the straights have it and queers don't (447). This monolithic understanding of heterosexuality steamrolls over prohibited and stigmatized heterosexual unions featuring people of colour, a steamrolling which Cohen parallels to her experience of queer activist spaces (443). Cohen solves the problem by reorganizing the queer "we," making example of the "*nonnormative* and *marginal* position of punks, bulldaggers, and welfare queens … [as] the basis for progressive transformative coalition work" (438, emphasis in original). I wonder if the problem is not so much specific to theory as it is to participating, to listening and moving in queer culture. It is an odd oversight given Cohen's interest in the punk as a queer sociological figure. By materializing a history of punk sound, I offer to Cohen an alternate way of approaching the failure of queerness' theoretical conceptualization to fully transform the politics of queer spaces.

Sounded meaning now plays an important role in changing the politics of queer spaces. LaBruce's image of punk has become dated with a growing queer rap scene and more QPOC-led punk (generated by an increasing number of hybrid cultures and identities in late capitalism). Dialogue with scholarship is partly responsible for new demands and updating the accessibility of queer spaces. J. Halberstam describes the boundary between subcultural participants

and marginalized academics as "slight or at least permeable" (2005: 161). As a performer and an audience member, I can bring myself as an example. A study of queer culture needs to reckon with its persistent auto-critique. For the final section of this article, I narrate two more stories featuring Strawberry Corncakes and myself. They're both moments in which we took similar turns when mutually navigating San Diego's queer and LGBT spaces. At the forefront are questions of diversification and development, of power inequities and strategies of resistance. Strawberry and I draw on very different pasts and presents to inform our responses to these questions — and yet, our paths collide. These stories raise questions about the relationship between sound in queer art-making and the politics of queer spaces. Listening to music through Strawberry — watching her engage in lip-synced performance, talking with her about music — made me listen differently. She tuned my ears to hear Hillcrest's art communities as queer, in the way that I had learned about queerness through Toronto queercore. She taught me there is radical work to be done in the gaybourhood in spite of hyper-investment and hyper-development. Inasmuch as the next section summarizes a narrative about race, class, and geography, it shows the growth of a researcher-activist and a shift in her priorities.

Pillow Talk

On March 7th, 2017, I went to see the Stunt Queen tour featuring Mykki Blanco, Cakes Da Killa, and DJ Sissy Elliott at Soda Bar in San Diego. Soda Bar is located in a wholly unmemorable place along El Cajon Boulevard's massive six lanes. The area is north of downtown but has a different character than more gentrified neighbourhoods like Hillcrest. It is just a 5-minute drive east of Denny's but even that short a distance away from the coast makes a world of difference. Cars and trucks rumble in gas stations, auto body shops, and other industrial spaces that tend to occupy liminal spaces between established neighbourhoods. It is the perfect hiding spot for me, a San Diego-based reader of "Don't Be Gay" who hoped to run screaming away from gentrification. Capital for developing and maintaining this part of El Cajon Boulevard is locally sourced, primarily from small business owners. There are no Starbucks cafes or Burger Kings. Even the grocery store next door, North Park Produce, is one of only two locations. Most people drive right past these businesses on their way to the 805 or the 15, two of the interlocking highways that suture the spacious sprawl of Southern Californian cities. It seems to me there is no effort to bring in new, upwardly mobile residents. The side streets

are lined with modest residential lots and old houses, not pricey condos and sky-rise buildings.

Noisy music venues fit well into a junky block without much other late-night activity. A smaller venue called SPACE, just two blocks away, books similar music. Like most local venues, there is a discernible scene at Soda Bar. The participants are defined through their desire to avoid bigger bands and bigger venues, descending upon the available infrastructure for shows and willing to travel small distances and visit strange places. The Stunt Queen Tour, for that night, expanded the umbrella of people that fit into that collectivity. Mykki Blanco and Cakes Da Killa are both queer rappers. Their inclusion in an underground music scene is a credit to the inroads that hip-hop music made into punk culture during the 1990s. Alternative Nation made room for commercialized versions of punk, rap, and metal, including a variety of crossovers such as rap/metal, punk/rap, etc. Mykki Blanco in particular — presenting as a genderqueer rapper and drawing upon their background in performance art and modelling to secure the genderfuck — is a testament to how punk and rap have grown in dialogue over the past few decades. The desire to break down sex/gender distinctions that first drew LaBruce and Jones to punk is a critical part of Mykki Blanco's performance practice (arguably more so than precursors for gender-deviance in hip-hop, mostly because Blanco is arriving via a gallery art scene that reads more legibly as punk).[10] For that evening, the Stunt Queen Tour drew a radical coalition of marginalized subjects who sought to transform the racial and sexual politics of Soda Bar's space for independent music.

Strawberry was there, pre-transition and out of drag. We had not yet become friends at that point. I recognized her because I had been actively attending drag shows and had seen her perform. That night was different from the typical Soda Bar patronage. Generally, I am flanked by white hipster boys in their 20s wearing flannel and sporting a casual scruff. The Stunt Queen crowd was significantly more diverse, filling the house with San Diego's QPOC. There are very few POC-identified places north of downtown San Diego, queer or not.[11] This non-history attests to the urgency by which Strawberry pursues spaces to perform. Strawberry's show *The Gig* is an obvious example, but she also proudly brags that she is the first person to bring a ball scene to San Diego. This entrepreneurial spirit and will to claim space brought her to Soda Bar, unfamiliar territory. We didn't speak to each other that night. I'm not sure she would have known who I was at that point. Our mutual gravitating toward this venue was entirely independent. Her presence is indicative of how much queer culture has grown; queer spaces have recently tried to open themselves to marginalized groups within the LGBTQ+

community who would previously have had to choose between spaces defined by a racial or a sexual collectivity. What happened at Denny's gives another side to this aspirational story. In that moment of distinction, queer subculture had yet to fully change in the minds of those to whom it should matter most. Within a movement undergoing a complex renegotiation, these conflicting narratives can both contain some truth.

Mykki Blanco's performance is incredibly gestural. They run from stage to bar, occupying all the space in the venue. At one point in the night, I became part of the performance. Mykki Blanco smacked me in the face with a giant pillow. In retrospect, I cannot figure out how I didn't see it coming. It took me a minute to regroup. I remember a few details: the pillowcase was leopard print, it felt rough, it was accompanied by a swift brush of cool air. I got into my own head and began thinking about the intentionality behind the gesture. I had not yet begun to transition at that time, so I thought maybe Mykki Blanco was using a pillow to block out the face of a white male spectator, to rebel against the fetishistic and voyeuristic way in which white spectators have asked POC subjectivity to teach them more about themselves and their own alienation (Nguyen 2012: 180). The violent and forceful action, from Mykki Blanco's perspective, could be one that raged to assert their own agency against the identity-eroding effects of punk's anti-capitalist politics. Blanco has been outspoken against comparisons with white LGBT artists that render secondary the Blackness of their project (Shorey 2015). They even took to Instagram and reposted a meme: a stock photo of a bandage being placed over a small cut; on the Band-Aid is written the word "queerness," and on the wound is written "white guilt." If they read this article, I'm guessing they would see right through the way I make this impromptu pillow fight all about myself, my feelings, my guilt.

By hosting Mykki Blanco, Soda Bar worked to keep queer spaces inclusive and keep up with the introduction of new vulnerable populations into queer communities. The pillow, at least from my perspective, dramatized the difficulties of bringing change to the cultural meanings attached to the word queer, meanings that have been laboured over since the mid-1980s. The way I was doing activist work at that time was through scholarly writing. I wrote a furious first draft of this article that was centred entirely around that event and clawed into all the problems of queer subculture. It felt good to let out those negative feelings, and the conversations it led to between myself and my collaborators (advisers, a reading group) all followed a political objective of a better understanding of queerness. The draft misfired on many accounts. Perhaps most critically, it didn't properly attend for how Strawberry and I both ended up at the same place that night. Strawberry and I both

grew up dressing punk and listening to hardcore. Both of us have a stake in finding space to refuse conformity. We made the same turn down poorly lit El Cajon Boulevard and wound up at Soda Bar seeking a gritty, sex-drenched performance of queerness. I took our shared sense of direction as a prompt to follow Strawberry elsewhere. Then, being guided by a QPOC, I would maybe find more responsive answers to the questions I posed for myself at the Blanco show.

I set out in search of new answers that would guide my study of race and queerness. In this second story, I am brought back to Hillcrest. I performed at Strawberry Corncakes' *The Gig* in its penultimate show (November 2018). *The Gig* takes place at The Rail. It's one of San Diego's historic gay bars (some consider it San Diego's first gay bar, opening in the 1930s though in a different location). The Rail has struggled to find its footing within the growing gay nightlife that surrounds it. When I first moved to San Diego in 2013, I remember The Rail as a bar I often walked past but rarely entered. The paint job was awkward. Inside looked haphazard and unfinished. But, in spite of its plain decor and unassuming charm, it was home to many queer dance parties and drag shows. I remember the first time I saw the remodel undertaken in 2016 under new ownership. While I had few attachments to the old Rail, the new Rail stuck out in a different way. The new owners embraced an open concept with a smoking patio from which you could see into the whole bar. They decorated the inside with fancy wood panelling and a bar was constructed to show off exposed brick. It has a faux-chic vibe. The workers have an elegant, masculine uniform of a formal shirt, slacks, and a vest. Drink prices went up — it's one of the more expensive places to drink in the neighbourhood now. Toronto queercore taught me to attach questions of class capitulation to questions of gender. I wondered if these changes were meant to attract a wealthier cisgendered gay clientele. In spite of these red flags, I'm pretty much a regular there with the amount of drag shows I attend. Growing familiar with the new Rail was counterintuitive and disorienting.

Strawberry primed The Rail in such a way that I could see it as a queer space. She advertises *The Gig* as "urban" and "high energy." Her initial objective was to gather San Diego's Black queens. She booked an intergenerational lineup with special guests Mia Pearl and Coco Chanel. Strawberry gave an impassioned speech about the value of having them present. These Black drag queens did formative labour transforming Hillcrest's bars into spaces suitable for QPOC who would follow them. The next month Strawberry booked Gigi Masters, continuing to stage the recovering of lost memories and a fantasy of a scene that could have been. In *The Gig*, Strawberry answers one of Muñoz's questions, "How does one stage utopia" (2009: 97)? *The Gig* is an "ideal" drag

bill that showcases the diversity of San Diego's Black performers, an ideal that "pushes us forward" (Muñoz 1997: 97). Strawberry's objectives, however, fell apart under a number of mundane pressures. There was some infighting. One of the core performers left San Diego. At one point there was a lack of interested performers, problems which were often traced back to the venue itself. The Rail doesn't pay quite like the other venues and, with the empty chairs from the hefty drink prices, tips don't add up to much either.

When I got the booking from Strawberry, I embraced the task of bringing my own queerness onto her stage. My song, wardrobe, and choreography played with the language of refusing sexual normativity that I had picked up from my background as a punk musician. I performed two numbers in a "tip spot" (a slot on the bill where you do not receive a booking fee, just tips from audience members). My first number was "Breathless" by The Corrs. I turned this *high energy* bit of late-90s, early-2000s adult contemporary nostalgia into an ode to autoerotic asphyxiation, putting a bag over my head and miming masturbation to banal lyrics about a love that leaves you breathless. I performed a *J.D.s*-inspired refusal of sexual conformity through tropes of BDSM and vulgarity. My next number was "Crush" by Jennifer Paige. It's another late-90s alternative pop track from an era when punk's feminist gender politics became vaguely connected to a new generation of women singer-songwriters. I wore my witchiest attire with hair raised near to the ceiling and delivered my most sultry choreography. I get why this struck others as "political." The humour is nihilistic and snarky, and the song selection demonstrates a commitment to outdated musical tastes indicative of an exhausted academic and ex-record collector. But I had also dulled my punky edges to deliver to an "LGBT" audience and space the expected Top 40, up-tempo numbers. At *Whips N Furs*, a punk drag show, I perform tracks with more distortion and grit such as Wendy O. Williams and The Plasmatics' "Put Your Love In Me," the 5.6.7.8.s "Bomb The Twist," and Peaches "Fuck The Pain Away." These are the kind of tracks that would make *J.D.s*' recurring list of the top queercore tracks. I have had trouble figuring out what to make of the middle-ground that my performance practice has taken in the bigger, Hillcrest-based opportunities I've had to enter San Diego's drag scene.

Inserting myself into November's *The Gig*, the show became its own moment in which the priories of queer and QPOC communities overlapped and maybe even competed for space. This time, there was no pillow and no confrontation. Nothing fuelled a furious draft of an article. Backstage at the show, I sensed Strawberry was tired. She already knew *The Gig* was coming to an end. That's how the politics of the show grew so murky. I got

on stage and performed what I thought was something pretty weird, but the drag show's audience-performer relations are so ritualized that I could hardly sense how people felt about it. Each drag performer comes out one at a time. We each had our spot to showcase our identity. The variegated performance styles rub against each other much more subtly. *The Gig* played itself out much more harmoniously than the Blanco show. Credit ought to be given to the mainstreaming of drag culture. Increased visibility has brought an unprecedented diversity into the space of the drag performance (especially as it's coterminous with the proliferation of vocabularies for gender and sexual identification). Drag performers and audiences are shifting and challenging the expectation that cisgays will dominate the performance space. As a trans-lesbian with little interest in performing hegemonic ideas about femininity, I am a participant in this shift. I guess I never really meant to ask, "Why political?" The descriptor always made sense. I was made uncomfortable because of how it positioned me as an interloper. I was made uncomfortable because I knew there was a QPOC, Strawberry, whom I felt I was displacing. Well played, Mykki Blanco: there's the guilt.

Each of these stories with Strawberry feature a challenge to a white, cisgay hegemony. Funnily enough, for all Jones and LaBruce's finger-pointing at capitalism, diversity emerges as a value radicalizing queer and LGBT spaces. Drag culture only became more diverse through mainstreaming. Injections of capital and visibility brought new performers with different purposes for engaging in gender-bending performance. I share my scene with ciswomen (hyperqueens and burlesque dancers) both straight and gay, genderqueer, and trans people who all have unique stories as to how they got started in an art of transformation. Contemporary drag culture has changed so rapidly that right now we have more questions than answers. In San Diego, I've already seen punk drag shows open up new performance spaces outside of the gaybourhood where they can both forward a critique of cisgay hegemony and also circumvent the difficulties in getting booked as an alternative act in the gaybourhood. Both performers and audiences have new opportunities to ask themselves what drag means to them. Is drag a celebration of gay culture? Is drag a means of performing a fuck you to sexual conformity? Scholars of queer theory working on contemporary drag culture need to be questioning the vocabularies the literature sets up for them to queer drag performances. Which performers are you celebrating and why? What do you consider queer drag or punk drag or alternadrag and how does its androgyny sit within the multiple layers of sound and motion and space in which that performance generates meaning? Drag has entered its most fascinating era yet and we all get to see where it takes us.

Conclusion

Queer identity is theorized as a disruption to gentrifying gaybourhoods in Toronto and San Diego. Queer theory, I would argue, theorizes queerness as *any* disruption to the gentrification of gay spaces.

This article's archival work specifies a conflict that undergirds queerness as it is performed in queer art communities. Strawberry's implicit understanding that our work divides into separate categories (LGBT and queer) points to the invisible whiteness and class privilege that dominates queer spaces. Where should this archival work take queer studies? Should queer scholars be concerned that their theorizing of gender and sexual deviance is insufficient to combat anti-Blackness in contemporary gaybourhoods? Many writers engaged in queer of colour critique have already suggested a need for a new analytic. My interest in writing this article emerged as an artist-researcher working in San Diego's gaybourhood. During my time there I witnessed performers relying on queerness to do the work of critiquing a depoliticized approach to gay entertainment. Some of these performer-activists are moving towards QPOC as the analytic to summarize necessary interventions. Over the past decade, public use of the term queer has been resuscitated by activists from its mid-1990s death bed. However, we may recently have witnessed the limit to its usefulness, plagued by problems already catalogued by authors writing two decades ago.

Notes

1. In Michael Warner's introduction to *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory* (1993) he writes, "Every person who comes to a queer self-understanding knows in one way or another that her stigmatization is intricated with gender, with the family, with notions of individual freedom, the state, public speech, consumption and desire, nature and culture, maturation, reproductive politics, racial and national fantasy, class identity, truth and trust, censorship, intimate life and social display, terror and violence, healthcare, and deep cultural norms about the bearing of the body" (6).

2. *Maximum Rocknroll* is a monthly magazine on punk culture founded in the early-80s by two senior members of the Bay Area's punk scene. The 1989 special issue on sexuality was edited by staff member Matt Wobensmith. He would go on to establish the first queer punk record label (*Outpunk!*). Jones and LaBruce had made connections with Bay Area queer art a few years earlier. A collective that would become *Homocore San Francisco* took a trip to Toronto in 1986 for an anarchist convention. Afterward, the two scenes developed in dialogue with one

another. When compared to Jones and LaBruce's earlier work, "Don't Be Gay" is a departure in tone and method. It is less reliant on irony when driving home its points about capitalism and gay liberation. The increased readership of *Maximum*, compared to Jones and LaBruce's local subculture, is a likely reason for these differences.

3. The Toronto Lambda Business Council was formed in 1978, representing the interests of small businesses on Church Street. A number of new bars had opened late in the decade (McCaskell 2016: 91).

4. By 1976-1979, 60% of Toronto's immigrants were not of European descent (Jansen and Lam 2003: 66).

5. Being the location of Canada's federal immigration offices, anyone awaiting a hearing for a visa or applying for citizenship would stay in Toronto. Afterwards, new immigrants stuck around Toronto because of family and community.

6. *J.D.*s restricting of punk androgyny to a 1970s moment raises fascinating questions. What of the gender-bending synthesizer stars who soundtracked 1980s new wave? As far as I can tell, the authors adopt a heavy-handed and restrictive narrative of punk history which ignores much of what happened outside of hardcore. While one may be tempted to think through Jones and LaBruce's insistent anti-capitalism and DIY ethos as factoring out the more mainstream work of The Human League or Boy George, where does that leave underground artists like Throbbing Gristle or Laurie Anderson? These questions are generative and, as music scholars, we should find them fascinating. I've set them aside because what truly matters to Jones and LaBruce is the critique of gay rights, more than a treatise of music criticism (though LaBruce does suggest he may be interested in that at points).

7. Zines are small, independently published maga*zines* which cover art, music, critical theory, news, and also include diary-like confessions. They are often traded for free, usually at shows or in community spaces like record stores or radio stations. Sometimes they are traded by mail. Through zines, writers and readers mark the boundaries of a tight-knit, underground community. During the 1990s, *riot grrrl* used zines to reach women marginalized from the hardcore zine and have them organize to coordinate safe spaces. *J.D.s* used zines in the late-80s to do the same work with gay and lesbian punks.

8. The song was the theme for a movie, *Sex and the Single Girl* (1964, dir. Richard Quine), based on Helen Gurley Brown's 1962 book of the same title. Brown's self-help book was pivotal in the sexual revolution of the 1960s, encouraging women to move forward in their careers and achieve financial independence, thus allowing them to experience the pleasures of sex. In its own way, Brown's book is a complicated balance between celebrating a market-friendly sex-positivism and grappling with the sexual disciplining that did inevitably follow. If taken as a feminist classic, this work can be critiqued in a way not dissimilar to how queercore approaches gay liberation.

9. The origins of the ska rhythm are vague, but all accounts combine, to varying degrees, Jamaican mento folk traditions, imported American R&B rec-

ords (particularly Rosco Gordon) and, to a lesser extent, Latin rumba or mambo and African-influenced Burru percussion rhythms. For more information, consult Kaupilla 2006.

10. Francesca T. Royster's *Sounding Like A No-No: Queer Sounds & Eccentric Acts in the Post-Soul Era* (2013) offers a closer reading of terms like "experimental" or "minimal" which are often attached to critical appraisals of Mykki Blanco's music. Royster argues African-American eccentric art is queered, not only because it displays gender variance, but also in a more nuanced reading of its psychedelic themes, where art borrowing too liberally from white culture is treated as "effeminate" (Royster 2013: 95).

11. Jim Miller tells the history of San Diego-based Black activism, describing how the Black Panthers descended from Los Angeles to assist in conflicts largely confined to the University of California, San Diego. Tellingly, his work does not convincingly allow his reader to picture the lives of local African-American collectivities. San Diego's history of Black activism comes off as a corollary to a story about labour relations (Miller 2003: 229). This uneven relationship is, of course, an extension of his primary thesis, that San Diego is an illusion of a city which takes violent action to portray itself as a mellow tourist paradise (161).

References

Bell, David, Jon Binnie, Julia Cream, and Gill Valentine. 1994. All Hyped Up and No Place to Go. *Gender, Place and Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography* 1 (1): 31-47.

Berlant, Lauren and Elizabeth Freeman. 1997. Queer Nationality. In *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City*, 145-173. Durham: Duke University Press.

Brown, Helen Gurley. 1962. *Sex and the Single Girl*. New York: Bernard Geis Associates.

Cohen, Cathy J. 1997. Punks, Bulldaggers and Welfare Queens. *GLQ* 3: 437-465.

Copsey, Nigel and Matthew Worley. 2016. White Youth: The Far Right, Punk and British Youth Culture, 1977-87. *Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies* 9: 27-47.

Dillinger, Michael E. 2000. Hillcrest. *The Journal of San Diego History: San Diego Historical Society Quarterly* 46 (4). http://www.sandiegohistory.org/journal/2000/october/hillcrest-htm/

de Plessis, Michael and Kathleen Chapman. 1997. Queercore: The Distinct Identities of Subculture. *College Literature* 24 (1): 45-58.

Farrow, Jane and John Lorinc. 2017. I Want Her So Much I Feel Sick: An Interview with Rough Trade's Carole Pope. In *Any Other Way: How Toronto Got Queer*, 149-152. Ed. John Lorinc, Jane Farrow, Stephanie Chambers, Maureen FitzGerland, Tim McCaskell, Rebecka Sheffield, Tatum Taylor, et al. Toronto: Coach House Books.

Ferguson, Roderick. 2004. *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Colour Critique.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

———. 2012. *The Reorder of Things: The University and its Pedagogies of Minority Difference*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Foner, Nancy. 2009. Gender and Migration: West Indians in Comparative Perspective. *International Migration* 47 (1): 3-29.

Halberstam, Judith. 2005. *In A Queer Time And Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives.* New York: New York University Press.

Halperin, David. 2003. The Normalization of Queer Theory. *The Journal of Homosexuality* 45 (2-4): 339-343.

Harris, Paul. 1997. *Black Rage Confronts The Law*. New York: NYU Press.

Hebidge, Dick. 2002 [1979]. *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. Reprinted with introduction by Terence Hawkes. London: Routledge.

Jackson, Ed. 2017. Alexander Wood: The Invention of a Legend. In *Any Other Way: How Toronto Got Queer*, 91-92. Ed. John Lorinc, Jane Farrow, Stephanie Chambers, Maureen FitzGerland, Tim McCaskell, Rebecka Sheffield, Tatum Taylor, et al. Toronto: Coach House Books.

Jansen, Clifford and Lawrence Lam. 2003. Immigrants in the Greater Toronto Area: A Sociodemographic Overview. In *The World in a City*, 63-131. Ed. Paul Anisef and Michael Lanphier. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Jones, G.B. and Bruce LaBruce. 1989. Don't Be Gay, or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Fuck Punk Up the Ass. *Maximum Rock n Roll* (February). http://fuckyeahqueercore.tumblr.com/post/1124736882

Kaupilla, Paul. 2006. From Memphis to Kingston: An Investigation into the Origin of Jamaican Ska. *Social and Economic Studies* 55 (1/2): 75-91.

Kheshti, Roshanak. 2008. Musical Miscegenation and the Logic of Rock and Roll: Homosocial Desire and Racial Productivity in "A Paler Shade of White." *American Quarterly* 60: 1037-1055.

McCann, Bryan J. 2013. Affect, Black Rage, and False Alternatives in the Hip-Hop Nation. *Cultural Studies/Critical Methodologies* 13 (5): 408-418.

McCaskell, Tim. 2016. *Queer Progress: From Homophobia to Homonationalism.* Toronto: Between The Lines Press.

McNeil, Legs and Gillian McCain. 1996. *Please Kill Me: The Uncensored Oral History of Punk*. New York: Penguin Books.

Miller, Jim. 2003. Just Another Day in Paradise? In *Under The Perfect Sun: The San Diego Tourists Never See*, 159-261. New York: The New Press.

Muñoz, José Esteban. 1997. The White To Be Angry: Vaginal Davis's Terrorist Drag. *Social Text* 52/53: 80-103.

———. 2009. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity.* New York: New York University Press.

Nash, Catherine Jean and Alison Bain. 2007. "Reclaiming Raunch": Spatializing Queer Identities at Toronto Women's Bathhouse Events. *Social and Cultural Geography* 8 (1): 47-62.

Nguyen, Mimi Thi. 2012. Riot Grrrl, Race and Revival. *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 22 (2/3): 173-196.
Ornstein, Michael and Tim McCaskell. 2017. The Evolving Demographics of Toronto's Gay Village. In *Any Other Way: How Toronto Got Queer*, 66-70. Ed. John Lorinc, Jane Farrow, Stephanie Chambers, Maureen FitzGerland, Tim McCaskell, Rebecka Sheffield, Tatum Taylor, et al. Toronto: Coach House Books.
Powell, Elliott H. 2019. Coalitional Auralities: Notes on a Soundtrack to Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens. *GLQ* 25 (1): 188-193.
Reynolds, Simon. 2005. *Rip It Up and Start Again: Postpunk 1988-1984*. England: Penguin Books.
Royster, Francesca T. 2013. *Sounding Like A No-No: Queer Sounds & Eccentric Acts in the Post-Soul Era*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
Shorey, Eric. 2015. Queer Rap Is Not Queer Rap. *Pitchfork*. March 31. https://pitchfork.com/thepitch/712-queer-rap-is-not-queer-rap/ (accessed October 27, 2018).
Small, Christopher. 1998. *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening*. Hanover and London: Wesleyan University Press.
Stryker, Susan. 1994. My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage. *GLQ* 1: 237-254.
Troper, Harold. 2003. Immigration into Toronto since the Second World War. In *The World in a City*, 19-62. Ed. Paul Anisef and Michael Lanphier. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. 19-62.
Velasco, Ab. 2013. A Brief History of the Church Wellesley Village. *BlogTO*. June 27. https://www.blogto.com/city/2013/06/a_brief_history_of_the_church_wellesley_village/
Warner, Michael. 1993. *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
Winsa, Patty. 2015. Before Pride, There was a Kiss: Toronto Gay Activists Look Back on 1976 Protest. *The Toronto Star*. June 27. https://www.thestar.com/news/insight/2015/06/27/before-pride-there-was-a-kiss-toronto-gay-activists-look-back-on-1976-protest.html. (accessed October 17th, 2018).

Discography

Beefeater. 1985. "Fred's Song." *Plays For Lovers.* Discord Records.
Jeffries, Fran. 1964. "Sex and the Single Girl." *Fran Jeffries Sings of Sex and the Single Girl.* MGM Records.
Operation Ivy. 1989. "One of These Days." *Energy*. Lookout Records.
Paige, Jennifer. 1998. "Crush." *Jennifer Paige*. Hollywood.
Peaches. 2000. "Fuck The Pain Away." *The Teaches of Peaches*. Kitty-Yo/XL Records.

Plasmatics. 2002. "Put Your Love in Me." *Coup de Grace*. Gigasaurus.
The 5.6.7.8.'s 1996. "Bomb The Twist." *Bomb the Twist*. Sympathy for the Record Industry.
The Corrs. 2000. "Breathless" *In Blue*. Atlantic/143.

Videography

Altman, Robert, dir. 1969. *That Cold Day In The Park*. Commonwealth United Entertainment.
LaBruce, Bruce, dir. 1991. *No Skin Off My Ass*. Self-Released.
Quine, Richard, dir. 1964. *Sex and the Single Girl*. Warner Brothers Pictures.