

**SINGING QUEER: ARCHIVING AND CONSTRUCTING A LINEAGE THROUGH  
SONG**

by

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## **Abstract**

Using an arts-based approach, this research examines how songs written by queer and lesbian musicians can account for and archive queer lived existence while constructing a musical genealogy for listeners and artists alike. By examining my own experience of listening to and attending performances of certain queer and lesbian identified musicians, and then composing and performing my own songs in public spaces, I make a case for the corporeal mobility of songs, and a process I have termed “queer musical lineaging.” Much of the research around music to date has centred on how it impacts and influences brain activity, and how it brings together subcultures and publics. The significance of this project lies in the research around musical processes and practices (listening, composing, performing) as corporeal acts that connect bodies to one another, and build kinships. This research draws mainly upon primary sources of autoethnographic, written accounts in the form of journal entries, stories, poems and song lyrics, and conducts an interpretive analysis of six “queer” songs, five composed by the author of this thesis, and one composed in collaboration with a trans\* youth. This project will contribute to research on arts-based practices as archival work, as well as the impact that songs have on people’s lives by broadening our understanding of music’s corporeal effects and genealogical role in lived experience.

## **Preface**

This thesis is the original intellectual property of the author, Katharine A. Cherry-Reid. The fieldwork reported in Chapter 5 was covered by UBC Ethics Certificate number H15-00388. Permission to use all of the lyrics from Ferron's repertoire that are included in this thesis was provided by Ferron, in writing, on November 8, 2015.

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## **Dedication**

This thesis is dedicated to all of the kind, passionate, thought-provoking and interesting people whom I have met on my musical travels, and especially those with whom I have developed “queer kinships”: thank you for listening to my songs and for showing up to my performances. Without you, I wouldn’t be me.

## Chapter 1: “At My Feet She Laid a Bone Down”: Laying the Groundwork

It is highly unlikely that as a teen who is developing a sense of cultural positioning you had the option of joining a queer dance troupe, playing in a queer band, or the chance to go and see a queer movie on a weekend with your queer friends. Your parents are not likely to have regaled you with stories about your queer aunt—the drag king, or your queer uncle—the infamous go-go dancer come sex-worker. Basically, until most of us are old enough to figure it out for ourselves, queer people do not exist. (Taylor, 2012, p. 149)

### Opening Words

When I first began to conceptualize this project, I was interested in the impact that songs and singing have on people, and how songs, as pedagogical tools, do social justice work. In particular, I was interested in how composing and performing songs that told stories about queer sexualities and genders—my own and others’—did the work of disrupting heteronormative scripts while making space for the stories of queer people to be heard. Queer songs and performance can be likened to what McCready (2011) refers to as “vehicles for ethico-political work by serving as counterstories that challenge the dominant story and thus working [sic] for social change” (p. 4). Queer songs then, tell counterstories, which disrupt normative narratives of sexuality and gender. In this way, queer songs could be called *countersongs*. And while this facet of composing and singing queer songs is certainly interesting to me, another idea was tugging at me that I couldn’t quite articulate. It was through the re-reading of a particular story I wrote in the first year of my graduate studies that my ideas around queer kinship, lineage, genealogy, and artistic practices began to emerge. The story I wrote was based on a reaction I had to one of the readings I had been assigned as part of my coursework for this degree. It was entitled “Goodbye Snauq” (2005) and it was written by Lee Maracle, Indigenous author, activist, and member of the

Sto:loh Nation. Maracle's writing sparked a curiosity in me, which led me to conduct this inquiry.

### **My Queerness Has No Lineage**

*Today, I found myself sobbing, having just read a story that was one of three articles assigned for one of my first classes of graduate studies at UBC. I was experiencing a passionate and visceral reaction to what I had just read, which was ironic because before beginning my studies, I had been doing a considerable amount of fretting that academic life was going to suck the emotional and creative life energies out of my body like a Shop-Vac. Clearly, I was wrong.*

*"Goodbye Snauq" by Lee Maracle (2005) is one of the most moving pieces of writing I had come across in a long time. As I read Maracle's story, I felt my heart fill up with a heavy, unexplained sadness. Then, midway through the text, I broke into tears and continued to feel sorrowful for quite some time after I had finished reading. I knew that my impassioned reaction to her words indicated that I resonated with much of what she talked about, but on a different level. Maracle wrote of the hypocrisy of trying to change or improve the very system in which she works and lives while at the same time being completely dependent upon that system. Her writing gave the metaphorical impression that she was locked in a dark room with only a tiny window from which she could look, a window that reflected the possibility of what living outside of that cell might look like should she ever break free. She spoke of trying to teach her students about the impact of colonialism in the hopes of undoing and repairing the damage, while attempting to instil in them a sense of hope and pride for their identities and histories as Indigenous people. She told of her struggles with melancholy, helplessness, and despair. She recounted feelings of disconnectedness from her own story, her ancestral ties and the land on*

*which they all live, revealing a sense of un-belonging, of not being anchored to something solid. This was the story of her people.*

*Through it all, she talked about looking to her elder, Chief Khahtsahlano, a picture of whom she had hanging on the wall in her office, for comfort and guidance. Reading Maracle's writing was difficult and simultaneously oddly gratifying: it was difficult to bear witness to her pain because it struck a chord, something familiar, something that reverberated inside me. I am not of Indigenous heritage. The land on which I grew up was not stolen from my family and community and systematically destroyed by invaders. My family and the people in the neighbourhood in which I grew up did not experience being herded up and placed onto reservations against our wills, nor were my sisters or any of my friends forcibly separated from our parents and grandparents and sent away to residential school.*

*But I do feel a sense of disconnectedness. I feel a sense that I do not belong, and these feelings reside in the queer part of me. It is the part that comes up, again and again, against dominant, normative ideas around gender, sexuality, and where exactly it is that I fit within and along those planes. It is my awareness that I have been relegated to the status of "outsider" by virtue of my sexual and gender alterity. This feeling like "the other" is what I have had the most internal struggle with. It is this awareness that has infused me with, at times, feelings of awkwardness, and caused me to alienate myself from much of the world around me, even if only in my own head. To be clear, I understand that my experience in the world as a queer person does not parallel the experiences of Indigenous people; however, I related to the words and images Maracle used to describe her experience. Her story wasn't simply about being Indigenous: it spoke to underlying themes of being an outsider in one's own environment, and*

*the irony of having to live within, and go along with a system which had so violently attempted to obliterate her ancestors and their villages.*

*In particular, Maracle's (2005) declaration "There is no ceremony to grieve the loss of a village" (p. 125) echoed in my mind. I don't know how to articulate the anguish I felt as I read those words. I can barely begin to conceive of the grave and immeasurable loss that Indigenous people have experienced, and continue to experience, at the hands of colonialism. As I pondered these notions of "loss," "village," and "community," and the history that accompanies these words, I reflected on the events in Maracle's story and the notion of trying to make sense of who one is, through knowing one's familial history, and one's connection to a village, a community. And while I was thinking about these things and Maracle's story, an idea I had been trying to formulate for some time came into focus in my mind: my queerness has no history, no bloodline, no lineage. Growing up, my family possessed no oral tradition of queerness. There were no yarns, stories, or anecdotes passed down to me about queer family members. There were no dykey little ditties or homo-hymns sung in the kitchens of my youth during the preparing of meals. There were no photographs of lesbian aunties, gay grandfathers, queer ancestors, or transgender elders on my walls to look to for guidance, reassurance and proof a queer existence, our queer existence. I have no bloodline of queerness: no family tree, no queer kin with whom to cavort, no "alternative" ancestral line to account for my queerness. There was an utter lack of queer role models from whom I could learn, and no queer bodies on whom I could lean: I was the only one. I am the only one: the only out queer person on both sides of my family. Further to that, there were homophobic jokes, innuendos, and slurs both at school (in which, I too, participated), and in the music videos and movies I watched along with the "flamboyant gay man" impressions my father occasionally performed at the dinner table. These experiences of*

*being surrounded by and immersed in homophobia and heterosexism have made for experiences that were persistently confusing and unsettling as I attempted to figure out and be comfortable with who I am and make sense of my sexuality and gender identity.*

*While I continued to be impacted by Maracle's story, I regained my composure and found myself ruminating on my own history, more specifically, my own queer history, or lack thereof. Questions began to take shape in my mind: How can one grieve the loss of an existence that was never acknowledged, that never counted? How does one account for an existence that has been disregarded and all but erased from collective memory—even from our own queer memories? How can one grieve the loss of a village that never really existed in the first place? These questions feel like questions of identity, place, (un)belonging, and of a desire to know oneself and one's connection to one's community, and family; questions that feel unanswerable for me because, at times, it feels like it is my queerness that distances me from my family and from some of my friends who are not queer. At least, I do that inside myself: I feel different, and I distance myself. And while Audre Lorde (1984) claims that "learning how to take our differences and make them strengths" (p. 112) is what must unite us against the forces that try to obliterate us, I do not always feel strong or connected to others through my difference, certainly not while among a group of people who I perceive as straight. I remain unable to be wholly comfortable and confident about these things. I remain unable to reconcile my queerness in all parts of my life, in every single relationship I have, and in every context in which I find myself. I have yet to know where my gender begins and ends, or if it does at all. I don't know how to perform a ceremony to grieve the loss of a village, to mourn the absence of a sense of belonging, to put words to the sadness I feel for the loss of a queer bloodline that never was. I don't know how to grieve growing up in the absence of queerness. I do not know how to grieve growing up without*

*anything or anyone from whom I could learn queer ways of being, of loving, of living. I do not know how to grieve growing up without a language to speak, stories to read and re-read, songs to sing, role models to guide me, elders to whom I could look, or a village of people to walk among who could teach me how to be queer. I don't know how to grieve growing up in the absence of a lineage of queerness, a lineage that could have helped put into context who I have become, a context that could have assisted me in making sense of myself in a world of institutionalized heterosexuality.*

*I do, however, know how to locate myself through music. I have learned how to sing myself into existence. I have learned how to document my own feelings and experiences on paper and transform them into songs. I have learned how to make myself visible and audible through performance. I have learned that I feel alive when I fill my lungs with air, when I open my mouth to form lyrics and sound; I have learned how to make my voice heard and my existence known, through song. I have discovered the process by which to record and archive my own stories and the stories of the queer people I care about, in melody. And I have become intimate with the ability to create a sense of belonging for myself, and to foster connections with others who also yearn to belong, not to the dominant collective, but to each other, through the artistic practice of making music. These are the ways in which I have begun to create and track a queer history for myself, and, perhaps, for others. These are the makings of a "queer auditory bloodline," a sonic map of melodic narratives which trace the stories of my life in song, songs that are proof of my existence and the existence of queer folks in my life. I make mention of my identity in song as an attempt to create a space for myself, and queers like me: to stake a claim, to insist on a place among others. I see it as an act of resistance. Otherwise, my queerness would be invisible, and I would be invisible. I've worked too hard to remain invisible to others, and I've worked so hard*

*to become visible to myself. Composing and performing songs are the ways in which I have learned how to account for myself and be accounted for. They are the ways in which I endeavour, in music, to document and archive my life and the lives of others: those with whom I have crossed paths, and those with whom I am in relationship. The lyrics from a song by Ferron, one of my favourite folk musicians, come to mind: "I'm going to stand up and let myself be counted for, stand up now. I've got my one life and what's it to amount to if I don't learn how?" ("Stand Up," Phantom Centre, 1995).*

### **The Nature of this Study**

Broadly defined, this project is focused on folk music, songwriting, performance, and genealogy. More specifically, this project investigates how the songs of lesbian-gay-bisexual-transgender-queer (LGBTQ) folk musicians and singer-songwriters I have listened to over the years, and the songs I have composed, have helped me to account for myself, encouraged me to orient myself towards certain "others," and helped me construct a lineage for myself and others who might listen to my songs. In particular, I am interested in how queer experiences and lives can be accounted for in song, and how sharing these songs with others can foster a kinship among queer people and construct a queer genealogy. Songs and performance based on stories about queer experiences and lives disrupt normative assumptions about sexualities and gender(s) and function as testimonials to queer life. In this project, then, I have examined how, as modes of story-telling, queer folk songs and performance of those songs operate as records of queer lived experience, problematize the heteronormative notion of genealogy, cultivate queer kinship, and build a queer lineage through the distribution of these songs, contributing to what Lauren Berlant



and Michael Warner (1998) refer to as “queer culture” and a “world-making project” (p. 558).

They explain queer world-making,

where “world,” like “public,” differs from community or group because it necessarily includes more people than can be identified, more spaces than can be mapped beyond a few reference points, modes of feeling that can be learned rather than experienced as a birthright. The queer world is a space of entrances, exits, unsystematized lines of acquaintance, projected horizons, typifying examples, alternate routes, blockages, incommensurate geographies...every cultural form, be it a novel or an after-hours club or an academic lecture, indexes a virtual social world, in ways that range from a repertoire of styles and speech genres to referential metaculture. (p. 558)

Here, Berlant and Warner are speaking about the vastness of what a “queer world” might look and feel like, where it includes an unknowable number of people and spaces where we might gather, feelings and connections between bodies that are not accounted for through heterosexual lines of kinship, and a social domain that is archived in innumerable ways.

As cultural forms, queer folk songs and performances contribute to and index a social world; they are records of queer metaculture, and evidence of queer lived experience and reality where I refer to “lived experience” in the phenomenological sense, as in experience as perceived from the inside, not examined from the outside (C. Ruitenbergh, personal communication, September 17, 2015). I refer to the songs examined in this project as “queer” in that they offer an alternative to the dominant stories of heterosexual loving and living by narrating non-normative experience as it pertains to gender and sexual identity. The songs included in this project challenge notions of heterosexual relationships and identities, and open up spaces for queer and trans\*<sup>1</sup> identities to be audible and visible. As such, I am interested in what Cvetkovich (2003) refers to as “making room for another kind of story” (p. 23) amid the hyper-representation of

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<sup>1</sup> Trans\* is an umbrella term which people who identify variously along the gender spectrum, except for cis-gender, may use to describe themselves. See [www.http://itspronouncedmetrosexual.com/2012/05/what-does-the-asterisk-in-trans-stand-for/](http://itspronouncedmetrosexual.com/2012/05/what-does-the-asterisk-in-trans-stand-for/).

heteronormative stories and voices that dominate popular culture and mainstream media.

Because much of queer life has been silenced or written out of history, I am interested in venturing into the “terrain of the unsaid” (Cvetkovich, 2003, p. 108) in the writing and sharing of queer stories through the medium of the folk song in order to document and trace queer lived experience.

Examining queer songwriting and singing as a way to account for, archive, and create a lineage of queer lives situates this project within a rich tradition of activist music that was employed by individuals and groups of people who existed on the margins of dominant, mainstream society. Notwithstanding the entertainment value of songs, activist music can be seen as a deliberate attempt to intervene in already established publics to achieve visibility of “othered” voices within society by creating new publics and further socio-political agendas. As such, there is an “activist” component to this project in that my aim here is to open up a discussion on how queer songs can assist queer people in accounting for and making sense of themselves in a world that is largely dominated by heterosexual discourse and images, and values that position opposite sex relationships as the norm. In talking about the purposeful development of narratives on queer intimate relations, Berlant and Warner (1998) note that queer culture has learned how to use these narratives “as a context for witnessing intense and personal affect while elaborating a public world of belonging and transformation” (p. 558). Berlant and Warner’s claim relates to my project in that I am curious about how queer folk songs and performance can, by making space for queer stories, elaborate a public world of belonging and transformation by contributing to a queer archive. Further, in contributing to a queer archive, I am interested in how songwriting and singing can cultivate a sense of belonging and connection

between queer people, that is, a *queer kinship*, and how these practices construct and trace a lineage—a genealogy of queer lived experience.

### **Research Questions**

When I began this project, I was unsure where my thinking and writing might lead me. As I researched the literature and pondered how I have made and continue to make sense of the world and myself in it through storytelling, songwriting, singing and performance and I continued to remain curious about the role that music—both mine and others’—has played in my life. Some questions that arose were: Why am I drawn to songwriting as a form of self-discovery? Why is it so important for me to tell a different story, my story and the stories of people I know who don’t conform to normative standards of gender and sexuality? What is it about music that assists me in making sense of my queerness, the world around me, and my place in it? How has songwriting and singing connected me to other people? How have other singer-songwriters influenced my life and my artistic practices of songwriting and singing? How do songs help others make sense of themselves and others? As such, this research is driven by the following questions:

1. How do the musical practices of songwriting and singing help one to account for oneself?
2. How does the composing and singing of queer songs help one orient one’s body towards other queer bodies and, in doing so, help one to “find one’s way”?
3. How does writing and singing queer songs do the work of building an archive of queer kinship?
4. How does an archive of queer kinship constitute a queer genealogy?

## **An Overview of this Thesis**

This thesis is laid out in six chapters. In this first chapter, I provide a review of the relevant literature that will help contextualize this research in order to show the significance that engagement with the music of other singer-songwriters has had in my life, as well as the impact that writing and singing my own songs has had on me in relation to the people who exist in the subcultures of which I am part. Along with presenting this literature, I weave in a story that narrates how I arrived at my research questions, and another story that contextualizes my introduction to music and, more pertinently, my introduction to the queer and lesbian singer-songwriters who have had considerable impact on my life. In Chapter 2, I draw on the intersections of queer theory, archival work, scholarship on publics, and music theory, or what Elliott (1995) refers to as “musicing,” in order to answer my research questions. While addressing these questions, I draw upon specific discourses, conversations, and knowledges within each of these theoretical domains to form my discussion. Chapter 3 explains in detail the combined methodologies I have used to conduct my research and analyze the field texts I have incorporated in this project as my “data.” My method of narrating this project seeks to be analogous to my process as a singer-songwriter and storyteller in that I aim to “tell” this thesis in the form of a story, using a collection of journal entries, poems, stories and song lyrics, set within theoretical and methodological contexts. As such, I have woven narrative portions of my methodology throughout this thesis, that is, journal entries, stories and poems which provide context for this project from my perspective as a queer singer-songwriter, rather than relying on the traditional format, which neatly sections off methodology, data, and analysis. Chapters 4 and 5 are the heart of this project. These are the chapters where I examine five songs I composed myself, and a sixth one that was composed with a trans\* youth I met at a summer leadership

camp for queer and trans\* youth and their allies. Each song I present in these two chapters is preceded by a story, which provides a context for the origin of the song. Then, I include the lyrics followed by an analysis of each song as it relates to the theories I discuss in Chapter 2 and some of the literature I review in this chapter. Finally, Chapter 6 comprises a conclusion where I draw together the key points from this research, pose lingering questions, and summarize the project overall.

### **Addressing Some Gaps**

While much research has been conducted on the neurological and physiological effects of music on the brain and body (see, for example, Baumgartner, Lutz, Schmidt, & Lutz, 2006; Blood & Zatorre 2001; Goldstein, 1980; Koelesch, 2010; Levitin, 2011; Menon & Levitin, 2005; Storr, 1992), my research attempts to examine the ways in which songs enter and move between bodies, drawing them together, creating a sense of belonging and kinship. This project examines how songs composed and performed by queer and lesbian singer-songwriters, followed by my own songwriting and singing practices, have helped locate me in relation to other queer people. I am interested in how songs and songwriting practices have helped me to feel connected to other bodies through time and space; and how songs perform a type of affective work that has material consequences. That is, songs engage people in emotional and bodily ways, connecting bodies and drawing people together.

Further, this thesis also seeks to “queer” the traditional notion of genealogy. Indeed, for decades, scholars such as Schneider (1968, 1984), Nardi (1994), and Weston (1991, 1995) have been reconsidering notions of “blood” and “biology” as they relate to kinship and genealogy. Initially, it was widely held that “unalterable biogenetic connections accounted for the

permanence of this very special sort of social relation” (Weston, 1995, p. 87) that we refer to as “kinship,” and further, that “procreation determined ‘true’ kinship and what was ‘genuine’ was not subject to change” (p. 88). However, Schneider (1968) rejected the notion that kinship is necessarily predicated upon the notion of genealogy, that genealogy produces kinship and in turn, kinship is formed out of genealogy. Thus, in 1984, he “developed a critique of the reduction of kinship to genealogy” (Weston, 1995, p. 88), where he and his colleagues argued that “biogenetic connection appeared as nothing more (and nothing less) than a peculiarly Western mode of demarcating a certain set of social ties, a culturally-specific way to signify belonging” (p. 88). This could be seen not only as a “peculiarly Western” mode of thinking but also a mode of thinking that is implicitly heterosexist: that kinship bonds between people and those regarded as family can only originate in heterosexual coupling. I am interested, then, in the various ways through which we come to feel a sense of belonging and kinship with others, and the ways in which these connections are developed through artistic practices and processes. I am interested in how my queer relations were formed through songs and songwriting, and how a genealogy can be constructed through songwriting and singing.

Much work has been done on how songs or certain genres of music can bring people together to create “subcultures” (Halberstam, 2005), “publics” (Cvetkovich, 2003), and “scenes” (Taylor, 2012) and while I do engage with these concepts, they are not the sole focus of my work here. I am interested in how music-making as a bodily process connects us to other bodies, which may or may not ultimately constitute these subcultures, publics, and/or scenes. More explicitly, I draw connections in my thinking between songs, the body, kinship, and lineage, and how—through the passing down of songs from one body to other bodies—one can construct a genealogy that connects oneself to others and vice versa. I also endeavour to address a gap in

studies on kinship and genealogy where the focus has been mainly on the permanence and “authenticity” of relationships, whether “real” (i.e., through biological ties) or “fictive” (i.e., through the bonds of friendship or “chosen” family) rather than on the range of processes by which people come to be connected. In the case of this project, I examine songs and the artistic processes of songwriting and singing as the ways I have come to be connected with others, and others to me.

### **Significance of this Study**

Because of its multi-disciplinary framework, this research makes a unique contribution to the already rich fields of arts-based education, queer theory, anti-homophobia and transphobia studies, cultural studies and performance theory, family studies, and research in the area of lineage and genealogy. It aims to become a starting point for encouraging a different way of thinking about how music fosters relationality and kinship between artists, listeners, and audience members, and endeavours to open up critical thought and conversation on identity, relationality, embodiment, and how notions of “family,” “kinship,” and “lineage” are taken up and reproduced in our society. This research could also inspire further research into how the creation and sharing of other art forms can construct genealogies, and it could open up possibilities for thinking about how engaging in various artistic practices that are shared among people in public spaces can create human connections through time and space. Finally, this research will also contribute to methodologies such as arts-based research and autoethnography.

## **Growing Up in an Un-Queer Place**

*For the majority of my childhood, I grew up on a farm my parents bought in 1979, in North Dumfries Township near a town called Ayr in southwestern Ontario. Cambridge, where my sisters and I were born, was the closest city to us, a fifteen-minute drive by car, half an hour by bicycle along Alps Road—an unpaved, hilly route that ran past the end of our gravel laneway towards town. But before my family and I moved to the farm, we lived in a white, middle-class neighbourhood in Cambridge that consisted mainly of large red and yellow brick homes, a sizeable park, and a yellow brick elementary school at the end of our block called Highland Elementary School. And, all of the families in our neighbourhood had a mom and a dad.*

*I had a friend who lived one block over from us with her mother and father and younger sister. Her mother had the most unconventional haircut I had ever seen on a woman: it was cropped very short around her ears, exposing the back of her neck, and it was spiky on top. It was the kind of haircut that I expected a man would have; however, her haircut was even shorter than most men at the time (it was the 70s after all). I had never seen someone's mother look like that: all the mothers I knew had some version of longer hair which was either pulled back in a loose pony-tail, pinned up with bobby pins or clips, or left hanging around their shoulders and down their backs. While I don't know if this woman was a lesbian—she certainly could have been married to a man and been in the closet—I do remember that her haircut was out of the ordinary for mothers at that time. Besides, I couldn't have even imagined what a lesbian was back then; I simply had no frame of reference for it when I was a child. But, I wonder about that mom now, from time to time.*

*As a young kid, I also recall being very intrigued by a character on TV by the name of “Buddy Lawrence,” who was played by then child actress Kristy McNichol on the sitcom*



*“Family.” “Family” aired on television for a few years in the late 1970s. Maybe it was her tomboyish manner, how she dressed (mostly in jeans and sporty-looking T-shirts), or her unusual name, I’m not sure. I just knew that I liked Buddy a lot and could relate to her. Years later I would discover, in talking to other queer and lesbian women in my age range, that they too, had “crushes” on McNichol when they were young. McNichol came out publicly as a lesbian in 2012. Perhaps, as a young child, I understood more about lesbians—or at least gender-nonconformity—than I was conscious of.*

*To my knowledge, there weren’t any queer people in the rural area of southern Ontario I grew up in, at least none who were “out” anyway. Except for the flaming, artsy guy at the high school I attended, but that was it. Mostly, while I was growing up, all I heard about queers were the homophobic slurs in school hallways: it was part of the lexicon of the young people with whom I engaged, and it was part of my lexicon. Calling someone a “fag” or “gaylord,” or saying “that’s so gay” to refer to something that one didn’t like or approve of was a common occurrence in the halls of the high school I attended. Very sporadically, someone would make a derogatory sexual comment about lesbianism, and when they did, the feeling I felt inside of me was so different. I distinctly remember noting a darkness in my body on those rare occasions. It was as if being a lesbian was so dirty, so unmentionable that these comments were scarcely spoken. Being a lesbian just didn’t happen where I grew up.*

## **School Climates**

Much has changed since those years in the 1970s and 80s when I was coming of age, up to and including the first same-sex marriage conducted in the Metropolitan Community Church in Toronto in 2001 by gay rights activist and minister Brent Hawkes, which eventually led to the

legalization of same-sex marriage in Canada in 2005. Over the years, more and more people in the mainstream public eye have come out as LGBTQ, and an increasing number of popular culture television series and films feature LGBTQ people and families. As well, LGBTQ social media sites and personalities have proliferated in the last decade. Yet, despite changes in societal acceptance and inclusion, heterosexist thinking and language continue to influence the lives of LGBTQ people (Grace & Wells, 2007; Janoff, 2005; Loutzenheiser, 2010; Sumara, 2007). Here, I wish to focus part of my literature review on the climate in schools regarding gender and sexual difference because, like most children in Canada, school was a place where I spent a lot of my time and, as such, it had a considerable influence in shaping who I was as I grew up. This is relevant to my project in terms of how coming of age in spaces that were not welcoming to people of gender and sexual difference impacted me greatly.

Songwriting and singing have become two ways in which I have learned how to undo some of the homophobic and heterosexist ways of thinking I internalized growing up. While the literature I cite in this section surfaced much later than the time I was in the public education system, it is relevant because it speaks to the kind of school climate in which I grew up. The combination of forms of overt and covert homophobia described here were certainly part of my experience growing up in small-town Ontario, and while I did not consider myself queer back then (I had no inkling of what it might even mean to be queer), these kinds of blatant and surreptitious messages instilled in me a negative view of anyone who deviated from gender and sexual norms, a view that I carried with me well into adulthood.

Heterosexist, homophobic and transphobic language and behaviour persist in schools, leading many youths to feel marginalized. In the first national climate survey in Canada on homophobia, biphobia and transphobia in schools, Taylor and Peter (2011) have found that

heterosexism and homophobia are still quotidian in that LGBTQ students, and children being raised in queer families, experience varying degrees of ongoing, systemic homophobia in the form of homophobic and transphobic slurs, exclusion and bullying. Kumashiro (2002) explains that many of our queer youth and youth from queer families feel like outsiders, and “Other” in their own schools. In this context, the term “Other” refers to

those groups that are traditionally marginalized, denigrated, or violated (i.e. ‘Othered’) in society, including students of color, students from under- or unemployed families, students who are female, or male but not stereotypically ‘masculine,’ and students who are or are perceived to be queer. (p. 32)

The near absence of queer representation in curricula and the dominance of heterosexual narratives and identities in mainstream pop culture also has a silencing effect on both queer and non-queer youth where they are not permitted or encouraged to discuss non-normative sexualities and genders in ways that are curious, empathetic, and/or accepting. This can contribute to both explicit and implied homophobic behaviours and heterosexist thinking in schools. Mayo (2009) argues, “official silence can continue to do the work of homophobic harassment by trivializing the experiences of sexual minorities and minimizing representations of sexual minority issues” (p. 265). When non-normative gender and sexual identities are not represented, discussed or even acknowledged, it sends an indirect message that people who are LGBTQ do not count. In order to recognize and understand oneself, one must “count” and be “accounted for” in relation to others. Songwriting and singing have helped me to account for myself, and to count myself as part of different subcultures, as well as the greater society.

While queer youth can also be invisible and subjected to various forms of harassment in our schools, heterosexual students and families headed by heterosexual couples benefit from the privilege of representing and being considered the norm. As Kumashiro (2002) notes,

“oppression consists not only of the marginalizing of the Other; it also consists of the privileging of the ‘normal’” (p. 37). Meyer (2007) lays out some of the problematics imposed by the “heterosexual family as norm” in heterosexist education by drawing our attention to “the exclusive study of heterosexual romantic literature, the presentation of the ‘nuclear’ two-parent family as the norm and ideal, and teaching only the reproductive aspects of sexuality and abstinence-only sex education” (p. 23). Queer youth and families are pushed to the margins as many teachers and administrators are hesitant to acknowledge, discuss, or teach about queer sexualities in their classrooms and communities, even as they discuss, on a daily basis, heterosexuality that is ubiquitous in classroom textbooks, reading materials, and informal conversations where nuclear heterosexual families are the norm (Stafford, 2013). This marginalization can lead to queer students and students of queer families experiencing homophobic harassment and feelings of alienation. It also enables heterosexual students to maintain their privilege and centrality. The significance of these findings map on to my thinking for this project as I consider the ways in which the songs of queer and lesbian singer-songwriters, and my own artistic practices of songwriting and singing, have been the tools through which I have uncovered and made sense of my own queer sexuality and gender identity, and located myself in the world in relation to other queer people and lesbians. Further, I am interested in how queer songs and performance provide a way for queer experience and narratives to disrupt the belief in the norm of heterosexuality by creating an audible archive that claims a space in the midst of dominant narratives, as proof of one’s (queer) experience and existence.

Finally, further to the silencing of people who are LGBTQ, and the privileging of heterosexuality, queer people experience various forms of homophobic reaction in day-to-day life. Mason (2001) discusses in her essay “Body Maps: Envisaging Homophobia, Violence and

Safety” some of the experiences and stories of those who are concerned about what they fear as the increasing “publicness” of same-sex relationships and sexualities. Mason claims:

in providing us with the means to recognize ourselves, and others, as certain types of subjects, sexual identities prompt us to assume responsibility for curtailing, confessing and regulating our own behaviour so as to conform to the expectations attached to these particular subject positions. (p. 26)

Indeed, labeling of people according to their sexual identities—regardless of the identity—comes with an expectation to behave in-line with the category of that particular sexual identity. LGBTQ people, not unlike people who identify otherwise, are also subject to particular ways of conforming to certain stereotypes associated with particular LGBTQ stereotypes both from within LGBTQ networks and beyond. I have experienced this sort of “policing” myself by acquaintances who identify as queer and trans\* and have pondered the ways in which I don’t consistently fit into or conform with stereotypes associated with LGBTQ identities. Further, the notion of “coming out” is an expectation only of those who identify as a gender or sexuality that is non-normative. The “responsibility” is placed on LGBTQ people to inform others of their gender identity and sexual preference(s).

Mason continues:

we need look no further than the popular and longstanding refrain against those who ‘flaunt’ their homosexuality to realize that the very suggestion that homosexuality *can* be flaunted is itself the product of the social and political hush that has historically enveloped the subject of same-sex sexuality. (p. 24)

Queer people are sometimes seen as flaunting their sexuality because their behaviour can fall outside what society deems as normative and expected. Moreover, Ruitenber (2007) contends, “heterosexual men commonly ‘flaunt’ their heterosexuality, but this behavior is not read as ‘flaunting’ because it is camouflaged by the gender conventions to which it conforms” (p. 267).

In fact, heterosexuality in general is “flaunted,” that is, it is omnipresent in North American society: on television, in advertisements, on radio, social media, and in most, if not all, songwriting genres, to name a few contexts, all of which prohibit a queer presence in the mainstream. Further, the perception that queer people “flaunt” their sexuality, for example by kissing or holding hands in public with someone of the same gender, is an example of the policing of (queer) sexualities in our society. That *behaving queerly* in public or mentioning one’s queerness is not possible without having to, at a moment’s notice, think through all the possible ramifications of the disclosure (and it is still considered a disclosure) is evidence of the marginalized and objectionable status of identifying as LGBTQ. This links up Sumara’s (2007) work where he notes, “living in a heterosexist culture means that persons are assumed to be heterosexual unless evidence to the contrary is presented” (p. 44), as in “flaunting” one’s (queer) sexuality. Heterosexuality is the norm and the marker against which all other expressions of sexuality are measured: it is considered the “normal” sexuality, from which all other sexualities are seen to deviate.

All of these are examples of how queer existence and lives have been, and continue to be dismissed and effectively erased from collective normative consciousness. Queer songs and performance interrupt these homophobic and heterosexist social forces by archiving queer lives and stories in music and creating a space where queer voices are audible. To be sure, hearing the voices and stories of the queer and lesbian singer-songwriters I came across in my 20s was like a revelation to me: for the first time in my life, I was hearing music that spoke to feeling and ideas about my sexual and gender identity that were buried deep inside of me. Music became a way for me to express my thoughts and feelings and tell my own queer stories: stories about what it

meant to come out and live my life as a queer woman/dyke/lesbian.<sup>2</sup> Music also became the way in which I shared my stories with others and made sense of myself in relation to those whose music I listened to, and to those who, in turn, would listen to my songs.

*Folklore*—“traditional beliefs and customs of the common people,” 1846, coined by antiquarian William J. Thoms (1803–1885)....Old English *folclar* meant “homily.” This word revived folk in a modern sense of “of the common people, whose culture is handed down orally.” (Online Etymology Dictionary, n.d.)

### **Folk Music, Women’s Music**

As a professional musician, I have been writing, singing about, and recording my experiences as a queer person, among other topics, for nearly a decade. Much of the lyrical content of my work is based on stories of my lived experience: lyrics that comprise personal accounts and reflections on my life as a queer woman intertwined with socio-political commentary about the society in which I live. Since I consider my lyrics to be the most salient characteristic of my songs, rather than the song’s melody or my guitar-playing, I align my work with the North American folk revival tradition. Bakan (2013) contends that that historically the North American folk revival tradition “embraced the combination of words and music to craft ‘songs of persuasion’ for the labor, civil rights and social justice movements” and has a “long tradition of engaging humanitarian artists who use words and music together to learn, teach, inquire, and share” (p. 8). Like most folk songs, my songs are countersongs: in singing publicly about my life as a queer person through the medium of song, I make an intervention in dominant narratives of heterosexuality and gender. In short, my songs are devices of resistance, and because of this, I consider this to be another pertinent factor in identifying myself a folk

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<sup>2</sup> I refer to myself throughout this thesis interchangeably as queer woman, dyke, and/or lesbian.

musician. While I consider my songs to be folk songs, for the remainder of this thesis, I will refer to them as “queer songs,” because they “queer” normative stories of loving and living found in the majority of the folk music tradition, and they are composed and sung by me, a queer-identified person. Here, “folk” becomes implicit, as in “queer folk” and “queering folk.” While scholarship has also been done on other kinds of queer-identified music such as queer punk and hardcore and “queercore” (see, for example, Ensminger, 2010; Gray, 2012), and queer music scenes (see Taylor, 2010), for the purposes of this project, I will be focusing on folk music as it is the main musical genre with which I identify.

The folk music revival of the 1930s is said to have been influenced by left-wing, communist ideas. For instance, the music work of labour balladeers like Ella May Wiggins, Aunt Molly Jackson, and Woody Guthrie has roots in communist thought (G. Cristall, personal communication, December 2, 2012). Bakan (2013, p. 8) cites the work of Denisoff (1971) and Lieberman (1989) who trace the folk music revival back to the late 1930s and the progressive activist work of an organization called “The People’s Songs,” of which one of the founding members was now well-known folk musician and activist, the late Pete Seeger. Indeed, folk music is activist music—“music of the people”—that has emerged from social movements such as the labour and union movement, women’s liberation and feminism, and the civil rights movement (Weller, 2008). In her book, *Born a Woman: Seven Canadian Women Singer-Songwriters*, Schwartz (1988) writes:

Folk music has traditionally been played on portable, handmade instruments—guitars, banjo, fiddle, harmonica, sticks, spoons, drums. And it has always been topical, concerning itself with the joys, troubles and aspirations of common people—as opposed to the more lofty concerns of the nobility. (p. 15)



Further, Gary Cristall, co-founder and artistic director of the Vancouver Folk Music Festival (1978–1994), says:

While the definition of the “folk song” remains a contentious issue, there is a tradition: people have always written songs about the conditions of their lives, and used them to change the conditions of their lives. Songs were written about people’s shared experiences, their views of the world; and they were sung to organize people. The labour movement, the women’s movement, these were “singing movements.” Folk songs were written in the hopes of changing the world. (G. Cristall, personal communication, December 2, 2012)

The objective of many folk musicians was to make their voices, and the voices of the movement, which they comprised, audible; to work towards social or political change of some kind; and to challenge dominant, hegemonic forces at work in society. Their work is activist and archival in that it documents stories that tell of people’s experiences and the conditions of their lives. This is relevant to my research because my work as a folk musician is also activist and archival: I document, in song and performance, the lived experiences I have as a queer woman, my desire to be connected to others like me, and my resistance against prescribed, dominant norms of gender and sexuality. That folk songs are passed down from singer to listener(s) and shared between people is certainly one of the objectives of composing and singing folk songs.

Folk music is a genre that creates space for alternate narratives and lives of difference: it is a genre to which activists have gravitated in order to tell their stories and share their struggles, stories and struggles that often reflect experiences of “the other.” For example, working-class/labour history stories, Indigenous stories, women’s stories, lesbian stories, and Black stories have been represented in the genre of folk music, adding “othered” voices to the range of musical genres, and perhaps even interrupting the hyper-representation of white, male, and middle-class images, identities, and stories that saturate mainstream music. *Sweet Honey in the Rock*, for instance, a Black, all-women, a cappella group began as a civil rights activist group in

the United States and became a major force in the women's music movement. Bernice Johnson Reagon, founder and former member of the group, stated that she "committed to understanding music as a way to make a stand" (Mosbacher & Sandstrom, 2002). Only weeks before the Stonewall Riots in New York City in 1969, Jewish butch lesbian singer-songwriter Maxine Feldman, penned one of the first "out lesbian" protest songs<sup>3</sup>, "Angry Atthis" in response to the discriminatory and often brutal ways that queer people were treated (Anderson, 2008). Later, in the 1980s, Canadian lesbian folksinger Heather Bishop recognized the power of music to inspire and activate people, and her role in motivating people to work for social and political change. She was quoted as saying, "Even when times are hard, we need music. We need to get filled up so we can go back out there and keep fighting. Part of my job is to fill people up, to keep them charged, to keep them proud" (Schwartz, 1988, p. 119). I understand the songs these women wrote, these artifacts of cultural production, to be examples of folk music: music that stood for something; that named and spoke out against injustices; that invigorated people to work for change; and finally, made minoritized people, their lives and experiences visible. This thesis builds on the efforts of women like these folk musicians and singer-songwriters and the impact of their work by examining the cultural and artistic practices of songwriting and performance vis-à-vis queer archive, kinship, and lineage.

Black musicians such as Linda Tillery, Mary Watkins, and Gwen Avery, and white, lesbian musicians such as Meg Christian, Alix Dobkin, Cris Williamson, and Margie Adam are credited with spearheading a genre of music that came to be known as "women's music" in the

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<sup>3</sup> Certainly, folk music has deep roots in the blues. While Feldman's song is said to be the first "out-lesbian protest" song, decades before the North American folk music revival, Black women blues singers such as Ma Rainey, Lucille Bogan, Bessie Smith, Gladys Bentley, Alberta Hunter, and Billie Holiday were known to have relationships with women, some of them even singing about it (see for example Ma Rainey's "Prove it on Me Blues" and Lucille Bogan's "B.D. Woman's Blues") and engaging gender-bending on stage during the Harlem Renaissance. See Angela Davis' (1988) book, "Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith and Billie Holiday" for a fascinating look at Black women and the blues.

1970s, which predominantly comprised lesbian-identified musicians, and was born out of the second-wave feminist movement (Mosbacher & Sandstrom, 2002). Women's music emerged as a defiant and creative response to the absence of women-identified musicians' presence of songs on mainstream radio and as a solution to the lack of women musicians being booked for performances and signed by major record labels (Carson, Lewis, & Shaw, 2004). In *She's a Rebel*, Garr (1992) wrote about the importance of the women's music scene as a disruption in the male-dominated music scene of North America. She quotes feminist singer-songwriter and activist Holly Near, another musician credited for founding "women's music," who claimed, "women's music was not just about music being done by women...it was music challenging the whole system" (cited in Gray, 2012, p. 29). Women's music was a genre that was intentionally created for and by "women-identified women" so that there would be spaces (in the form of festivals, political events and marches, live music venues, and homes) where not only women performers could perform, but where women were the producers and sound engineers, and audiences and consumers of music created and performed by women could come and be a part of those performances. Schwartz (1988) notes,

the women's movement support the women musicians by providing a receptive audience eager to hear music that matched its experience. At women's conferences, rallies, demonstrations and celebrations, musicians have the opportunity to perform at a time when the general public was not willing or ready to listen sympathetically. (p. 16)

Women's music was a deliberate act of organizing: it served to create a space that did not exist within a business dominated by men and male musicians (Mosbacher & Sandstrom, 2002). This relates to my project because the genre of women's music and the foundational work of the feminist and lesbian women folksingers and singer-songwriters who were a part of that politicized musical movement were foundational in setting the stage, so to speak, for the

musicians whose music would more directly, and profoundly, influence me.

The groundwork laid by feminist and lesbian folk singers and singer-songwriters in the late 60s and early 70s opened the (closet) door for lesbian singer-songwriters in the 80s such as Ferron, Heather Bishop, and Phranc to emerge. They were followed by a resurgence of neo-folksingers in the late 1980s and 1990s that included singer-songwriters like Tracy Chapman, Indigo Girls, and Ani DiFranco. All of these artists were alluding, sometimes subtly, and sometimes not so subtly, to their own non-normative identities in their songs (Carson, Lewis, & Shaw, 2004). These women were documenting in music stories that resonated with their predominantly woman-identified audiences. By singing about lesbian and bisexual women's experiences, often with varying feminist slants, they were intervening in mainstream, heteronormative society in order to make themselves and women like them more visible. They were challenging dominant narratives of gender, sexuality, and sexism, among other things, by singing directly about misogyny and heterosexism, and by commanding attention on stages and live music venues across North America (Carson, Lewis, & Shaw, 2004). In doing these things, they were providing *musical* proof to mainstream society that feminists, lesbians, and queer women existed: they were archiving their own stories of what it meant to be women and identify variously as LGBTQ against the backdrop of a male-dominated music industry and society. They were queering the notion that only heterosexual men could be musicians. Further, their audiences, comprised mainly of queer and feminist women, challenged the notion of who might comprise an audience at a musical event in a public space.

By adding my voice to the legions of musical LGBTQ voices that have preceded me, my work as a queer artist is a continuation of the work of lesbian folk-singing foremothers and queer women singer-songwriters who composed and performed songs that made room for queer stories

to be heard amid the hyper-representation of heterosexual stories within musical and larger cultural contexts. By recording, distributing, and performing their songs, these musicians effectively “handed down” their stories to me and other audience members, much like an oral tradition (or perhaps, in the case of music, an *aural* tradition) where relatives hand down familial stories to other family members. The music of the folksingers and singer-songwriters I listened to allowed me to make sense of myself and the social world around me and taught me how to recognize and account for the queerness in me. And, it was by listening to the songs and attending the concerts of certain folksingers and singer-songwriters that I began writing and singing my own songs. Through these practices of listening, witnessing, composing, and singing, I was born into queerness because, like Taylor (2012), I had “no real way in to any form of organized queer culture, and thus had no idea of what queer should look or sound like, it was the music...that I...naturally ‘gravitated’ towards from which I drew my queer instruction” (p. 149).

Below, I recount my experience of coming into a life of music at a young age, leading up to and including the profound impression that three female acts made on me in young adulthood, and whose work as feminist musicians significantly influenced my own journey in coming to grips with my queer sexuality and gender identity, as well as a singer-songwriter and performer. Emily Dickinson (1976) claimed that she “knew good poetry when the words made her hair stand on end” (cited in Neilsen, 2008, p. 96), and certainly, I knew I was hearing good music when I discovered the work of these three acts and my life began to transform.

### **The Importance of Indigo Girls, Ani DiFranco, and Ferron**

*I began listening to music at a young age. My parents had a copy of Shaun Cassidy’s 1977 self-titled album, which included hits like “Da Do Ron Ron” and “Take Good Care of my*

*Baby.” I remember being so into the music of Shaun Cassidy that I felt compelled to write him a fan letter when I was five or six years old, telling him just how amazing I thought he and his music were. The jerk never wrote me back, but I eventually got over it. My very first vinyl record was Linda Ronstadt’s 1978 album, “Living in the USA.” She was on the cover in knee-high sport socks, roller skates, and a blue satin jacket. I used to play it on my red and yellow plastic Fisher-Price turntable in my bedroom when I was a kid.*

*Then, around that same point in my life, my parents took my sisters and me to our first rock concert: Roy Orbison at the Centre in the Square in Kitchener, Ontario. I was around seven years old at the time. I don’t remember a whole lot from the concert because I fell in and out of sleep throughout the whole show. But I do remember understanding that I was witnessing someone of significance, this man who had had a huge impact in helping shape a genre of music that had been, and continues to be, so immensely important to countless numbers of people, myself included. Then, there were the seemingly endless hours of classical, opera, and choral music we listened to on our way to school in the morning. I remember groaning in the car on the way to school, “Please dad, no more CBC! Can’t we listen to Q107? Ever?” and the concerts at Roy Thompson Hall in Toronto, including Handel’s Messiah nearly every Christmas, all of which has given me, in my adult life, a great appreciation and love for the heart-wrenching sounds of stringed instruments like the violin, viola, cello, and piano. Both of my parents loved to sing, and my father played guitar. We also had a piano in the house, which my sisters and I fiddled around on after being forced to take piano lessons for a number of years. Even though we weren’t the perfect family by any stretch of the imagination, we did sing a lot, even at the dinner table while we were eating. And, I loved listening to the radio. CHYM Radio in Kitchener, Ontario, was my station of choice when I was a kid and a few of my favourite songs were*

*“Sailing” by Christopher Cross, “Little Jeanie” by Elton John, and Pete Townsend’s “Let My Love Open the Door.” And while I never was a Beatles fan, my parents were, and I remember hearing the radio announcement while getting ready for school on the morning of December 9th, 1980, that John Lennon had been shot and killed the previous night in New York City. I ran downstairs to tell my parents, knowing that this was a momentous piece of news. I was nine years old at the time.*

*While all of this music was happening around me, I was growing up a bit of a tomboy. My mom told me recently that one of her friends’ daughters remembers that, when I was young, I used to tell her I wanted to be a boy. I ran around mostly barefoot, and, until I couldn’t get away with it anymore, shirtless, too. I worked alongside my father in the barn and the fields and when I played with my friends, I played all the roles that boys typically played—I was either the husband or the hero, and I liked it that way. As I grew a little older, I knew I was a little different from the girls I was friends with in high school. I certainly dated boys and behaved in ways congruent with my gender, but I also knew that, unlike my female friends, I didn’t want to get married to a man and have children. That simply did not appeal to me. But I saw around me no other examples of how one’s life could be lived any differently. I had no queer role models and no words for sexuality and gender identities that were different from the norm. I barely knew lesbians and gay men even existed, except in the derogatory comments I would hear about them throughout my elementary and secondary school experience. The idea of being queer wasn’t even on my radar back then; it simply wasn’t an option. And so unconsciously, I conformed. Needless to say, I wasn’t a typical young woman. In my own head, I felt a bit of an outsider, while at the same time, quite unaware of how different I was in terms of my sexuality and gender identity. So, when I discovered the music of three female acts in particular, my life began to*

*crack open.*

*I was in the third year of my undergraduate degree at University of Guelph, Ontario and was listening to a range of music that was beginning to shape who I would later become as an artist, activist, and educator. Having already discovered artists like Bob Dylan, Neil Young and various rock bands and folk artists while I was in high school, I was now almost exclusively listening to female neo-folksingers: I was like a sponge for their voices and the stories they were telling in their songs. I became completely enamoured with my new favourite folk duo, Indigo Girls. My hip, younger sister introduced me to Indigo Girls by giving me their second album, “Closer to Fine.” I remember listening to it while driving to Guelph nearly every day, being inspired by their beautiful harmonies and socially conscious lyrics while feeling simultaneously uncomfortable, knowing that when these two women referenced love and relationships in their songs, they were singing about loving women. My friends at university and I would talk about being curious about what having sex with a woman might be like. We talked about wanting to “just try it,” because, as burgeoning feminists, it was “cool”—at least in that circle I was hanging out in—if you at least considered experimenting with your sexuality. But, I wasn’t at the place yet where, if I were presented with such an opportunity, I might take it. The whole thing still kind of scared me, especially having grown up in a climate where queer people were either non-existent or scorned. At this point in my life, I was still “all talk.”*

*One day, a friend of mine began raving to me about this radical, fiercely independent folksinger who sang about things like feminism, bisexuality, sexism, corporate power, abortions, and menstruation. My friend lent me a cassette tape saying, “You’ve got to hear this! Check out the song ‘Blood in the Boardroom’!” I looked at the cassette tape in my hand: it was titled “Puddle Dive” and artist’s name was Ani DiFranco. I was curious what this chick with a*



*baldish-looking head wrapped in a head scarf, who was sporting a nose-ring and wearing a T-shirt with the sleeves cut off was going to sound like. What came blasting out of the speakers of my incense-infused, bumper-stickered, silver hatchback car that spring day felt like a revelation! Here was a feisty woman with a strange, punky haircut, armed only with a weird, loud, yodely voice and an acoustic guitar, singing about the power of women's bodies and the significance of bleeding every month:*

*Sitting in the boardroom, the I'm-so-bored room  
listening to the suits talk about their world  
they can make straight lines out of almost anything  
except for the line of my upper lip when it curls  
Dressed in my best greasy skin and squinty eyes  
I'm the only part of summer here that made it inside  
in the air-conditioned building decorated with corporate flair  
I wonder if these boys smell me bleeding though my underwear ("Blood in the Boardroom,"  
1993).*

*I mean, who the hell sings about stuff like that anyway? DiFranco named women's bodies as the most fundamentally powerful in the world: bodies that have the power to give life. I was utterly transfixed. I remember seeing her perform for the first time in a small bar in Waterloo, Ontario called Phil's Gransons. It was 12 bucks to get in, and it was packed with longhaired, pseudo-hippie chicks (like me); shaved-headed, Dr. Martens-wearing, black T-shirted, "alternative" grrls and a handful of guys, one of whom was my boyfriend at the time. We were*

*all jammed in there, squished up against one another, cross-legged on the floor, eyes and hearts glued to the stage. I recall thinking at the time that I wanted to be one of the alternative grrls, or at least “with” one of them, and wondering how I might ever make that happen. I also remember this feeling of community, this sense that all of us were there for a common purpose: to witness this 5 foot 2, hairy arm-pitted woman with a big personality and an even bigger voice sing about our lives; our hopes and dreams, our curiosities, our outrages, our loves. I had a felt sense of being transported into a different time and place through Difranco’s performance and also from the energy that was present in the room. There were palpable sparks of connection between audience and performer throughout the entire show. It was a magical and memorable experience, one that I will never forget.*

*After having finished my undergrad, I moved out to British Columbia in 1994. I did some time in a dead-end relationship with a guy in Vancouver for a couple of years. But once I had come to the realization that I needed to leave him, I figured that moving to the Kootenays, a mountainous region in the south-eastern corner of British Columbia known for its “mountain culture,” and, where I knew practically no-one, was a safe place to try and work out some of the simultaneously scary and exciting feelings I was having about dating women. I found an apartment just off the main strip behind the local grocery store in Castlegar, BC and soon began working four part-time jobs: as a cashier at the grocery store; a coffee barista at the only coffee shop in town that made lattes and cappuccinos; a teacher’s aid with the local school board; and a support worker at a residential program for developmentally challenged adults.*

*It was several months later, while working at my job at the residential program, that I discovered a Canadian singer-songwriter whose music would forever change my life. My co-worker on shift that day was gay, and I was confessing to him about having my very first crush*

*on a woman. I had met her at Common Grounds, I told him, the coffee shop where I also worked. She would come in with a friend of hers to drink coffee, smoke cigarettes, and hang out. She would chat with me and laugh a lot, and I would make her coffee and get those weird, nervous butterfly sensations in my stomach that people talk about when they are smitten with someone.*

*Suddenly, my co-worker felt compelled to ask me if I had ever heard of Ferron, “you know,” he said, cocking his head to one side, “the lesbian folksinger?” I said I had heard of her but had never listened to her music, and that I sometimes confused her with another artist who I kept hearing about named Stephen Fearing (not because of the lesbian thing obviously, but because of the sonic similarities of their names). “Well,” he exclaimed, flapping his hands up and down, “you have to listen to this,” and he went over to the music collection in the living room, picked out a CD, and shoved it into my hands. It was called “Driver.”*

*That day marked the beginning of my life-long devotion to Ferron’s music. I listened to “Driver” over and over. And then, I went out and purchased as many Ferron albums as I could get my hands on. At this point in my life, I wasn’t composing my own music yet but I knew that if I ever did write a song, I wanted to pen something like Ferron’s “Girl on a Road” (1994), a song about growing up and leaving a slow-dying life for a musical one, alone and full of fear, hurt and possibility:*

*My mama was a waitress, my daddy a truck driver  
The thing that kept their power from them slowed me down a while  
I remember the morning, it was the closing of my youth  
When I said goodbye to no-one and in that way faced my truth  
And a walk along a river and the rain a-coming down*

*And a girl on a road*

*There's a rhythm to the highway to match the rhythm of your fears*

*My shopping bag possessions scattered with my splattered tears*

*A string of nights in truck stops in darkness and in lies*

*And a man they all called Tigerboy, he just had to show me why*

*He just had to give me something, I'd forever understand*

*As a girl on a road*

*It's difficult to describe, in a sentence or two, the impact that Ferron's songs had on me back then. I didn't have the words or even the awareness to understand how to articulate my emotional response to her music, nor did I always entirely understand what she was expressing in her songs. Even now, the only way that I can describe it is that her songs speak to my soul: the combination of her lyrics, the melodies she sang and her deep, unpolished voice got inside me and resonated with me on a level that was unlike any other music I had heard. When I listened to her songs, I felt myself slowly starting to wake up in a different way than I had when I listened to the music of Indigo Girls and Ani DiFranco. I was waking up to the possibility of finding myself, of joyful living, of reciprocal loving, and of really knowing myself in a way that contradicted how I had known myself through my family and the people with whom I had grown up.*

*About a year after I began listening to Ferron's music, she came to Nelson to perform a concert at the Capitol Theatre. I went, and the theatre was packed, mainly with women—local middle-aged lesbians, it seemed. When the house lights went down and she walked on stage, tears began to roll down my face the moment she started to strum her guitar. I was finally getting*

*to witness the artist whose music and lyrics had made a home in my heart, and who was singing what felt like my story, or something pretty close to it. Ferron is a poet: her powerful lyrics and her strong, deep voice resonated with me on a level at which, at the time, I was not yet aware. She sang about things like love and tenderness, abuse and power, loneliness and gratitude, interwoven with lyrics that hinted at a deep connection with the Earth. Ferron had such a way of being vulnerable and funny and warm on stage, and so completely inside her music when she sang, that I didn't know whether I wanted her to continue chatting with the audience between songs, telling stories with her dry humour or simply to sing. I was mesmerized watching this butchy-looking lesbian performing on stage: a woman who loved other women, who could articulate herself and her feelings through song so poetically and genuinely. I felt completely and wholly moved throughout her performance.*

*The songs of Indigo Girls, Ani DiFranco, and Ferron spoke to me in a way that no other songs, up until that point, had done. Their songs marked the beginning of my journey into an exploration of queer identity, a queerness of being. In short, discovering their music changed me: it changed my life. Their songs were different than anything I had heard before, and their songs spoke to the difference in me. Listening to their music opened my eyes, my heart, and my mind. And then later, through my own writing, singing, and performing of music, I began to decipher and recognize the "me" that wasn't represented in mainstream pop culture. I began to write and sing to make sense of the world and my place in it. I began to write and sing to work through the messy and complicated feelings of what it means to be alive, aware, and queer in this world. In short, I wrote and sang and performed myself into existence.*

As I began to collect the music of Indigo Girls, Ani DiFranco, and Ferron—in the form of cassette tapes and compact discs—their songs, poetry, and the photographs, artwork and liner notes of their albums comprised the genesis of a queer musical genealogy in which I could begin to locate myself and my life in relation to those around me. Their work as artists provided me with a sense of kinship: there were others out there who felt like I did, who saw the world in similar ways as I, who desired women...and who sang about it! Little did I know that in listening to their music and attending their performances, I was internalizing their lyrical and musical styles and that their songs—both the musicality and the social-political messages—were penetrating my body in ways that would, a decade later, inspire my own approach to songwriting. Indeed, I learned how to write and sing songs about issues that were important to me (and to those who would eventually listen to my music) by listening to the lyrics and music, and watching the performances of Indigo Girls, DiFranco, and Ferron. This is not to say that other music has not greatly influenced me, it has. However, these particular artists impacted me in ways that were different: their songs taught me to cut through my feelings of invisibility and shame, or through what Ahmed (2004) describes as “an intense feeling of the subject ‘being against itself’” (p. 103). Their songs provided me with a way to begin to understand my *queerself*, and to account for and reaffirm who I was becoming. Eventually, in writing, singing, and performing my own music, I learned how to how to speak out against or rather, *sing* out against the things I did not want to accept. I learned how to build a queer archive of songs in order to resist invisibility and inaudibility, and through this archive, I began developing a queer kinship, tracing a queer genealogy for myself, and others, in song.

## Chapter 2: “We’ve Got to See Beyond the Horizon”: Theories of Words and Music

**Genealogy**—early 14c., “line of descent, pedigree, descent,” from Old French *genealogie* (12c.), from Late Latin *genealogia* “tracing of a family,” from Greek *genealogia* “the making of a pedigree,” from *genea* “generation, descent” (see *genus*) + *-logia* (see *-logy*). An Old English word for it was *folctalu*, literally “folk tale.” (*Online Etymology Dictionary*, n.d.)

### Growing and Nurturing a Queer Family Tree

*When we want to make sense of who we are, we often look to our families to know and understand ourselves. We turn to our childhoods, especially our parents, to account for the ways we view and experience the world, to fit the puzzle pieces of our lives together, to find answers about who we are. We research family trees and trace ourselves back through the branches of their lineage to unearth the rhizomes of our heritage. We follow our bloodlines like roads that crisscross one another on a map or footpaths and trails through the forest of our ancestry, in order to know ourselves. We attempt to connect the dots of our lives, searching to make sense of ourselves. Becoming familiar with our lineage orients our bodies towards that lineage, locating us in the world. Knowing where and who we come from helps us to decipher ourselves and anchors us to other bodies, stories, lives.*

*But, what happens if parts of our bodies, lives, and stories cannot be traced? What if we cannot follow our bodies back to a family line, if pieces of us cannot be pinpointed to our pedigrees, or found by examining our family history? And what if parts of our stories cannot be linked to our family relations? What if those pieces of us that cannot be elucidated are the pieces that have been deliberately left out, omitted, overlooked or hidden by society and those around*

*us? What if the parts that cannot be accounted for are parts that have, for many years, been shrouded in secrecy, shame, and fear?*

*And, what if these fragments could be pieced together by hearing and witnessing and resonating with the stories of others in song? What if voice and words and music could fill in the blanks of one's life, and be the scraps of fabric that, when stitched together, create a whole person, a complete self? What if people could be brought together with other people in the act of singing? And, what if songs became the bloodline and constituted a constructed lineage, an inventive genealogy, and songwriting was an act of lineaging? Then, the women songwriters who came before me would be my foremothers-in-melody, and my songwriting contemporaries, my siblings-in-song. Concerts and performances, festivals and conferences would be our family gatherings. We would be related through our stories in song, threading a musical bloodline, an archive of audible ancestry that weaves through our lives, binding us to one another and locating us together in time and space.*

### **What do I Mean by “Queer”?**

I make use of Kumbier's (2014) definition of queer as “oppositional, unruly and coalitional” (p. 4). Queer-as-*oppositional* means that “queer” expresses what Warner (1999) refers to as “a more thorough resistance to regimes of the normal,” that is, to “heterosexual modes of being, life choices, and institutions, as well as cultural imperatives to act and comport oneself in accord with conventional expressions of gender” (as cited in Kumbier, 2014, p. 4). Queer-as-*unruly* refers to those people who “live their lives across and outside of categories and classification systems” (p. 6), and queer-as-*coalitional* means that queers “understand coalition and community as instrumental factors in the articulation of personal identity and in broader



social transformation” (p. 8). Kumbier refers to “queer” as

the multitude of identifications, experiences, and discourses that emerge in and from the daily lives of people who experience themselves between, outside of, and in tension with a number of normalizing forces, like neo-liberal or capitalist socio-economic orders, or oppressive social practices and structures. (p. 7)

By Kumbier’s definition—and for the purposes of this project—“queer” engages non-normative ways of being, thinking, conceptualizing, talking, and loving. It is a disruption of dominant, discursive, and hegemonic forces. It is also an alignment with those who also think and live “queerly” as a way to resist and challenge these forces and bring about social change. In short, “queer” misbehaves because it is a departure from the “straight” status quo. Taylor (2012) provides a useful definition when she argues that queer

in its various manifestations of identity, practice, lifestyle and culture—is a way of being and belonging that is not always readily accessible, spatially locatable or even socially favourable according to many mainstream discourses and the dominant logics of heterosexual hegemony. (p. 144)

What I find intriguing about Taylor’s definition is the notion that there is a “queer way of belonging.” This notion is relevant to this project in that there are ways people come to feel a sense of belonging with each other that do not follow traditional, familial, heteronormative modes and definitions of relationality.

I also borrow Halberstam’s (2005) notion of a “queer way of life” to describe the non-normative ways of being, loving, and expressing oneself that I often write and sing about. A “queer way of life,” Halberstam asserts, “will encompass subcultural practices, alternative methods of alliance, forms of transgender embodiment, and those forms of representation dedicated to capturing these willfully eccentric modes of being” (p. 1). For Halberstam, “queer” refers to “nonnormative logics and organizations of community, sexual identity, embodiment, and activity in space and time” (p. 6). I adopt Halberstam’s definition of “queer time” as a “term

for those specific models of temporality that emerge within postmodernism once one leaves the temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity, risk/safety, and inheritance” (p. 6). I use “queer time” to explain how I was born into queerness through folk music, not from the moment I exited my mother’s womb and entered the world, but in the sense that my birth into lesbianism and a queer life began through folk music, specifically, folk music sung by lesbian-identified singer-songwriters in my early 20s. It is at this time of discovering women neo-folk singers and the genre of “women’s music” that my queer identity and life began to take shape, and that eventually led me to compose and sing my own songs and helped me to begin to make sense of who I was in the world. Ahmed’s (2006) notion of “queer,” where she posits that queer means to “disturb the order of things” (p. 161) also resonates with me. She says, queer disturbances are “uneven, precisely given that the world is already organized around certain forms of living-certain times, spaces, and directions” (p. 161). Certainly, my queer birth did not happen in an orderly manner; it was uneven and not organized around heterosexual notions of time, space, and direction in terms of the process of birth.

Finally, in thinking and speaking about *queering genealogy*, specifically, using the artistic practices of songwriting and singing to construct my own genealogy, I use queer as a verb, a force that destabilizes normative ways of thinking, where queer means that “traditional models have been ruptured” (Jagose, 1996, p. 1), troubled or interrogated. Here, to “queer genealogy” means to disrupt the ways in which we think about and refer to “genealogy” as a heritage shaped only by heterosexual, familial ties and bloodlines. It means to think about and claim other ways to define ourselves and our relationships with others in ways different than through our families of origin. It means that we can invent and name our lineage and locate ourselves in the world through other means, for instance, through music. It means we can find

our way to the body, and find our way home through practices like songwriting and singing. I have long wondered (and so have some of my critics!) why I have focused much of my songwriting on queer topics: the personal relevance of my work as a queer songwriter and activist is coming into focus as I write this thesis. Engaging in queer lineaging through the practice of songwriting and singing is a creative, musical approach to constructing a family and a sense of “home”: it represents an *inventive* queer genealogy.

### **Music in the Blood: Coming Home**

The phrase “in the blood,” as in “music in the blood,” speaks to the notion that the body can be inhabited with traits such as musicality, which, in turn, can be “passed down” through bloodlines and familial relations. I have “music in the blood”: there were musical people on both sides of my family, my mother’s side and my father’s side. My mother’s great-grandfather, Walter Reid (1842–1909) was a poet and a musician. A recent article in the *Kitchener Record* noted that Reid “presented concerts with a 10 member orchestra he formed, largely with family members. He eventually build the 250-seat Reid Hall in Ayr (later destroyed by fire) so larger musical events could be held” (Fear, 2015). My mother loves to sing and her father, my grandfather, could often be heard humming or whistling a tune while he moved through the day. My father was a guitar player and singer, and his brother, my uncle, a bass player. They had a band in high school, and they performed for school dances in their region in the mid-sixties. Their mother, my grandmother, had a love for the piano, both as a player and a listener. Music was always around me as a child and I grew up exposed to a range of music, from rock ‘n’ roll to folk and country, to classical and opera. My parents took us to many concerts, mostly classical and rock ‘n’ roll. Indeed, music is “in my blood.”

I do not know, however, if I have queerness in my blood. Certainly, I had no “out” relations in either of my parents’ families, and I haven’t quite felt “at home” in my family since coming awake to my queer sexuality and gender identity. Halberstam (2005) argues that queerness may begin with “the potentiality of a life unscripted by the conventions of family, inheritance, and child rearing” (p. 65). This statement reminds me that my life lived outside of these scripted conventions holds the possibility for a different kind of living and loving—in a way—a life liberated from certain familial expectations and timelines. Yet, my desire to write and sing about my queer life and the lives of my loved ones compels me to consider how producing creative works in the form of songs can contribute to a *queer musical inheritance* and provide me with a felt sense of belonging and connection, and the feeling that I am “at home.” Ahmed (2006) posits, “the task is to trace the line for a different genealogy, one that would embrace the failure to inherit the family line as the condition of possibility for another way of dwelling in the world” (p. 178). Therefore, I am interested in how representing and documenting a life through songs can contribute to an inheritance or genealogy of sorts that provides the condition of possibility for another way of dwelling in the world. Songs make life experiences audibly tangible: they are material evidence *about* life experiences and they *document* life histories. As Cheryl Dunye claims, “sometimes, you have to create your own history” (cited in Kumbier, 2014, p. 52), and for me, writing, singing, and performing music is a deliberate attempt to create my own history by telling queer stories and constructing a queer genealogy through song.

Constructing a genealogy through song champions notions of “chosen family,” queer relationality, and a “coming home to oneself.” A queer genealogy through song is a disruption of the traditional, heterosexual notion of familial bloodline or ancestry. Indeed, as Elizabeth

Freeman (2010) observes, gays and lesbians are commonly perceived as

having no past: no childhood, no origin or precedent in nature, no family traditions or legends, and, crucially, no history as a distinct people. This temporal and historical erasure has prompted what queer theorists call ‘a queer desire for history’ or ‘historical emotion.’ (cited in McBane, 2011, p. 14)

Freeman argues that this desire has “manifested in valuable archival work” (cited in McBane, 2011, p. 14). I have a “queer desire for history” which fuels my artistic compulsion to write songs. Engaging in queer storytelling, songwriting, and singing is evidence of my impulse to archive my experiences and construct my own history. Imagine my delight to discover that the etymological origin of the word “genealogy” is in fact, the word “folctalu” which literally means, “folk tale”! The revived terms “folk,” as in “of the common people, whose culture is handed down orally” (*Online Etymology Dictionary*, n.d.), and “folk tale,” which can be thought of as a passing down of family stories and histories, provided me a way to think about how listening to the “folk tales” of other queer singer-songwriters, and then composing my own musical “folk tales” about my own life is a genealogical endeavour. Hearing the “folk tales” of queer and lesbian singer-songwriters helped birth me into my own queer desires and ways of living. Then, in composing and singing songs, I was writing my own folk tales and tracing my own life, and the lives of other queer people I knew, through music.

In her article, “‘Coming Home’: Queer Migrations and Multiple Evocations of Home,” Anne-Marie Fortier (2001) discusses, among other things, queer narratives of migration and the notion of home, not as an origin but a destination. I have experienced this reference to “home as a destination” spoken at two different cultural gatherings, Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival (Michfest), USA, and Camp fYrefly in Alberta, Canada. Beginning in 1975, Michfest became the longest-running women-only, lesbian, feminist gathering in the world (Echols, 1989; Ryan,

1992; Taylor & Rupp, 1993, cited in Rowe, 2014, p. 7) up until the summer of 2015, when founder Lisa Vogel announced that that summer would be the last. Upon arriving at the gates of Michfest, attendees were always greeted by the women volunteers who checked tickets and directed the parking of vehicles with an enthusiastic “Welcome home.” Indeed, this was a Michfest motto. Having attended Michfest several times and experienced this greeting each time, I can say that this deliberate naming of Michfest as “home-as-destination-rather-than-origin,” conjured in me a sense of belonging to a subculture unlike anything I have ever experienced: it was an intentional community made by and for (predominantly lesbian and queer) women. Driving through the gates at Michfest and looking around, I was acutely aware each time that this place did not feel like the “home” in which I grew up, or the family with whom I was connected. Rather, it felt like home-as-destination: a place where women<sup>4</sup> gathered once a year to celebrate being and loving women, in the absence of men. At Michfest, I had a distinct feeling of being part of a “community” that had shared experiences, and that there was a kind of relationality between the other bodies gathered there. It felt like a different kind of “home,” a home where I could be myself, less afraid and more comfortable in my own skin.

This “home-as-destination” is similar to an adage spoken at University of Alberta’s Camp fYrefly, a four-day retreat for LGBTQ youth and allies. In his talk at the closing ceremonies of camp each summer, the co-founder/co-director of the camp reminds campers, volunteers, and staff alike that when life beyond Camp fYrefly becomes challenging and isolating (read: life in a world where heterosexual values, beliefs, images, and messages are dominant), “there are only

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<sup>4</sup> The notion of “women” is a highly contested term both in queer theory and also at (the former) Michfest as their policy of admitting only “womyn-born-womyn” to the festival was subject to ongoing, contentious, political debate and backlash over the years. I use the term “women” here with the understanding that it does not necessarily accurately reflect all who attend the festival, nor does it reflect who is aligned with this policy or gender identity.

361 days until you get to come back home.” Both Michfest and Camp fYrefly’s reference to “home” is a deliberate attempt to construct these gatherings as places of belonging for non-normative bodies: that is, woman/lesbian/dyke/bisexual/queer bodies at Michfest, and LGBTQ bodies in all their iterations at Camp fYrefly. “Home” at Michfest and Camp fYrefly is constructed as a destination, a place where like-minded individuals come together to connect with a new kind of family, a family that comes together by choice, and because of shared experiences of living outside norms gender and sexuality. It is an attempt, within subcultures like Michfest and Camp fYrefly, to create a sense of “family” as a complement to one’s birth family, or perhaps to replace that family with one that is more supportive and congruent with one’s values and beliefs around sexuality and gender identities. And while Michfest and Camp fYrefly are not perfect “families” free from conflict or challenge, in both of these spaces I felt a sense of community with other queer bodies; “being home” meant sharing a (safer) space with other queer bodies. As well, I felt a feeling of “coming home to myself” in these spaces, that I could relax into my body and be my (queer) self, not having to worry about how that part of me might be perceived, assessed, and judged by others.

The notion of “chosen family” is familiar in LGBTQ circles. The blog, “Queer Queries: Connecting and Complicating Queer Theory, Stories, and Understandings” (2015) defines “chosen family” as

a group of people to whom you are emotionally close and consider “family” even though you are not biologically or legally related....Chosen families are also often born out of necessity. Many queer individuals do not rely on their biological families in ways that other individuals might be able to. Anywhere from being completely rejected by family, to experiencing extreme homophobia at home, to simply not feeling affirmed by a biological family are some realities that many queers face. This type of disconnect from the family one grew up in, stresses the importance of building a new, intentional, healthy family. (paragraphs 1, 4)

Certainly, queer people are not the only ones who experience misalignment with their family of origin; indeed, many people attest to feeling like outsiders in their own family. While my family did not reject me for being queer and have been supportive of me in regards to my sexual and gender identity, it has been important and affirming for me to develop relationships with other queer people, to develop a “chosen family” of queer and queer-friendly companions with whom I can talk about “queer things” (that is, to share our experiences as queer people and talk about what it means to be queer bodied in this world and so on) and share a queer relationality and understanding that I am otherwise not able to when I’m with my family of origin. As well, touring as a musician has allowed me to develop relationships with all kinds of people, mostly queer, some “queer-friendly,” across Canada and into the USA, whom I might not have met had I had a more conventional career. Music has been a vehicle for the development of many friendships and acquaintances with people I would consider “family”: with some I have developed strong bonds and maintained regular contact; with others I have been able to stay and visit, or meet socially while I was passing through town. Through writing and singing music, I have created a family for myself that I otherwise would not have had. Meeting queer people while being on tour, being present at Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival and Camp fYrefly, and listening to the songs of other queer and lesbian singer-songwriters has helped me to locate myself in the world, and feel “at home.” Further, writing my own songs about my life experiences, specifically those experiences that relate to my sexual and gender identity, has helped me to “come home to” those parts of myself. Rather than being extraneous to who I am, “home” exists inside me.



## A Musical Archive: Queering Genealogy with Songwriting and Singing

McBane (2011) writes that E. G. Crichton’s “interest in queer lineages and genealogies,” in her archival project *Lineage: Matchmaking in the Archive*, “springs from her sense of being abandoned, ‘orphaned,’ and effectively disowned by her own biological family shortly before first coming out” (p. 14). McBane goes on to discuss

the queer psychology of the “orphan” or “foundling”—a subject-positioning outside the heterosexual matrix of the couple and the nuclear family—[which] resonates with Christopher Nealon’s notion of a “foundling” in literature where kinship relations are reimagined along lines that avoid the heterosexual marriage plot, and kinship relations turn instead toward “affect-genealogies” that generate a “lineage of invisible kin.” (p. 15)

Like Nealon’s “foundling,” I have had to reimagine and reinvent myself and kinship relations to other queer bodies through song. I was never abandoned, disowned, or orphaned by my biological family, but because I lacked any queer role models in my family, I had to take up the task of birthing my queerself into the world. I was forced to make sense of, become familiar with, and raise my queer self up, as parents might a child. I did all this through music—through the listening to the songs of others, and through the writing and singing of my own songs. In this way, music has “parented” the queer part of me into existence; and I have learned how to nurture the queerness in me through songwriting and singing. In discovering and wanting to locate my queerness somehow and somewhere in the world, I began to write my queer self in and into song. In this way, queer songs are archival work because they are evidence of queer lives.

In her book, *Ephemeral Material: Queering the Archive*, Kumbier (2014) examines “how queer subjects use different media, like documentaries, oral history interviews, personal photographs, zines, and intentionally fabricated ephemera to tell our stories” (p. 2). Kumbier contextualizes her work by looking at Cvetkovich’s (2003) “An Archive of Feelings: Lesbian Public Cultures” and Halberstam’s (2005) “In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies,

Subcultural Lives,” both of which employ the archive as a way to organize and document queer social memories, cultures, and experiences and propose “alternative models” (Kumbier, 2014, p. 21) of the archive. Kumbier also cites the work of performance scholar Diana Taylor (2003), who proposes that “‘archival memory’ takes material form in ‘documents, maps, literary texts, letters, archaeological remains, bones, videos, films, cds, all those items supposedly resistant to change’” (as cited in Kumbier, 2014, p. 17). Taylor also refers to “another cultural repository” she calls “the repertoire,” which “enacts embodied memory: performances, gestures, orality, movement, dance, singing—in short, all those acts usually thought of ephemeral, nonreproducible knowledge” (p. 17). My queer songs would fall under Taylor’s notion of “the repertoire” because the songs I compose are an enactment of embodied memory: they are written from my body about my experiences of living in a queer body. As Kumbier notes, the archive “collects materials that were created in the context of everyday life and work” (p. 11). As a queer subject, I use songs as the medium with which to tell the story of my everyday life and, in some cases, to tell the stories of other queer lives. I write and sing songs with the desire to trace my queer beginnings, and to guide and help me make sense of my life. This is not unlike the desire to locate oneself in one’s genealogy or lineage through their family.

Kumbier (2014) notes the absence of queer presence in history when she asserts, “in response to the absence or erasure of LGBTQ subjects and experiences from the dominant historical record, queer studies scholars have sought to create an historical record of their own” (p. 14). She continues by claiming that queers are, and have already been in the process of “actively building archives, self-documenting, inviting community members to help develop collections, teaching others how to archive, and developing culturally-specific practices, principles, and documentation strategies” (p. 12). In composing and singing songs, I have been

actively self-documenting and archiving my queer life and the queer lives of others in music for over a decade. Queer songs speak back, or rather, *sing back* to the erasure Kumbier speaks of by archiving and making known and making heard the experiences of LGBTQ subjects. This composing and singing, this documenting of my life in song creates a lifeline of sorts: it is a body of work that represents a lineage of my queer existence.

In speaking about a queer subcultural archive, Halberstam (2005) asserts, “the archive is not simply a repository; it is a theory of cultural relevance, a construction of collective memory, and a complex record of queer activity” (p. 169). Here, Halberstam is making a case for cultural memory, the “ephemeral material” of queer cultural events, for example, ticket stubs, posters, fliers, and ways of living and loving that are documented by cultural producers, particularly women musicians. A repertoire of queer songs can certainly add to the construction of a collective queer memory and represent a complex record of queer activity in the telling of queer lives through story. This shared storytelling through song is a passing down of queer stories in the oral tradition which contributes to a queer lineage. Halberstam (2005) goes on to say that “cultural producers play a big role in constructing queer genealogies and memories” (p. 170). Halberstam discusses lesbian punk bands such as Le Tigre, The Butchies, and Bitch and Animal, who pay homage to feminist queer-of-colour theorists, filmmakers, lesbian authors and the women’s music movement of the 1970’s, saying that “the historically situated theorists, filmmakers, and musicians rhyme with each other’s work—the rhyme is located in the function and not in the words” (p. 170). By “rhyme” Halberstam (2005) means how these musicians respectfully attribute their work to the foundations built by other anti-heteronormative cultural producers, both previous and current. As “archival records of lesbian subculture” (p. 173), the songs produced by these bands salute the musicians who laid the groundwork before them; they

are an acknowledgment of the impact that other musicians have had on these musicians, as well as the subculture in which they are situated. This speaks to a relationality among artists and among songs. Likewise, my queer folk songs are archival records of queer lives that also “rhyme with” and build on the songs that rose out of the women’s music movement. Not only did I learn how to write songs by listening to the work of musicians like Indigo Girls, Ani DiFranco and Ferron, but I also learned about queer ways of loving and living. My songs build on the songs of these artists, for if it weren’t for them, it is clear to me I would not have written the songs I had, and I might not have become the queer woman I have become. Indeed, it is difficult for me to say who I might have become were it not for their songs, and my own.

Here, I revisit Crichton’s (2010) project “Lineage: Matchmaking in the Archives,” where she brings together archives of LGBTQ people who have passed away with living participants who then must go through the archive they have been assigned and invent a response in their chosen medium. Crichton, in turn, helps them shape this response as an artistic, archival instalment. Crichton’s project

strikes a balance between making radical interventions in the archive as a way of creating queer genealogies where none were necessarily legible, and embodying the idea of “lineage” in its pedagogical dimensions: as the relationship between teacher and pupil; mentor and mentee; a handing-down of tools and traditions. (McBane, 2011, p. 11)

McBane notes the relational aspects of Crichton’s archival project and highlights the notion that knowledge and traditions can be passed from one person to another when working with archival material. Singer-songwriters also embody the idea of lineage by passing along archival material to their listeners: songs are the tools and traditions handed down to listeners by singer-songwriters. By listening over and over, singing along, and playing my guitar to songs composed by queer women folksingers and singer-songwriters, I not only learned how to write songs but

also how to articulate social relationships, how to name my feelings, how to talk about experiences, and how to tell stories in song. In this way, I inherited a queer discourse: the songwriters and the songs were my mentors, and I their mentee. The songs were the “tools” that taught me the “traditions” of what it meant to be a queer-dyke-lesbian woman, and what it meant to feel and understand my sexual and gender identities. As one of the characters says to her husband in the film *Love Actually*: “Joni Mitchell taught your cold, English wife how to feel” (2003). Likewise, the music of Ferron and Ani DiFranco, in particular, taught this novice Canadian lesbian how to feel (and how to *do life queerly*). The raw, fiery passion in DiFranco’s songs gave me a way into anger and rage while maintaining a sense of optimism. Ferron’s tender poetics put words to my sadness and longing. Her songs also taught me how to be with and love another woman.

In effect, the songs of these musicians mentored me in my life as a queer woman and as a musician. I began to strive to compose songs that mentored others and provided the kind of role modeling that the songs of Ferron and DiFranco provided me. I aspired to write songs that mentored people along in their own lives; in their relationships with themselves and with the people around them. This mentoring through song is akin to a “handing down of tools and traditions” which helps instill a sense of belonging and a feeling of “coming home.” Thus, I propose that in “musicizing” (Elliott, 1995) about my (queer) life and the (queer) lives of my loved ones, espousing the notion of mentorship through song and the concept of handing down tools and traditions through songwriting and singing, I am engaging in the act of *queer musical lineaging*, that is, creating a queer lineage through song. Queer musical lineaging through song provides a sense of belonging and a feeling of “coming home” by listening to the music of others and then composing and singing songs about my experiences and the experiences of my queer

loved ones. This queer lineaging, like musicing, happens through my body, through deliberate, corporeal, musical acts of songwriting and singing.

Prior to beginning graduate studies and this research project in particular, I did not think of my work as archival or as an act of lineaging: I simply saw it as something that was “in me,” something that I felt compelled to do: I needed to write and sing myself, and others like me, into existence. I felt the urge to carve out a space for myself and other queer people. I felt compelled to account for and make sense of my sexual and gender identity, and I wanted to interrupt dominant narratives of sexuality and gender. However, I now also view the practice of writing, recording, and performing my stories in the form of folk songs as an archival practice of documenting and making publicly available my own history and the history of other queers I know and care about. This process of narrating my own stories is akin to what Sharon Marcus (2005) refers to as “auto-archiving,” that is, “writing personal memoirs to document queer histories” (cited in Kumbier, 2014, p. 14). Archiving livelihoods is the act of documenting and tracking of records of quotidian lived experience and is an attempt to provide evidence of the existence of a life. Many of my songs are “personal memoirs” set to music. The artistic practices of songwriting and singing trace and leave traces of my queer lived experience in music through the medium of the folk song. It is through this archival practice of composing and singing songs that I see and understand myself and connect with other queer people with whom I share this life. This *queer auditory archive* has helped me create a way to locate myself (and hopefully others) in this heteronormative world. Further, this is an important aspect of queer lineaging: I write songs to make sense of my own life and, in the recording and performing of these songs, I make a contribution to a public archive which others, in turn, can make use of or build on in their own sense-making processes—much like I did with the music of Ferron, Difrancio, and Indigo Girls.

This is the genealogical aspect to which I am referring: it is the passing down of songs between bodies.

### **“Musicing”: A Bodily Process**

When I engage in the musical practices of songwriting and singing, I create a feeling of being “at home” by composing songs that provide me with a sense of belonging and connection. Then, I share these songs with others by way of recordings and public performance. The act of composing, singing, and recording songs comprises an innumerable variety of creative, bodily decisions and actions in order to create and re-create a particular experience for myself and my listeners. The term “musicing” was coined by Elliott (1995) who pointed out that music is “something people do,” that musical works are not only a “matter of sounds, they are a matter of actions” (p. 49), in that they come about by deliberate human action. He continues, “musicing reminds us that performing and improvising through singing and playing instruments lies at the heart of MUSIC as a diverse human practice (performing, improvising, composing arranging, and conducting)” (p. 49). Further, in discussing performance as an act of musicing, he cites the work of Sparshott (1982) who contends, “performing involves doing and making. For to make something is always to do something, and doing something always involves making a difference of some kind in a situation or condition” (as cited in Elliott, 1995, p. 50). Composing and singing queer folk songs are acts of “musicing”: in writing and singing songs, the musicing I engage in narrates and documents aspects of my queer life. In immersing myself in the practice of musicing about my life, I make an intentional decision to write and sing about certain topics with the hopes of making a difference in my life and the lives of others. That is, composing and singing assist me in documenting some of my experiences, telling my stories, and making sense of who I am in

the absence of queer familial role models.

Bodily knowledge is used to engage in music-making. Hampshire (1965) posits, “to perform music is to achieve intended changes of a musical kind through actions that are taken up deliberately, or at will” (as cited in Elliott, 1995, p. 50). Elliott continues, “what this means, in turn, is that to perform music is to act thoughtfully and knowingly. For selecting, deploying, directing, adjusting, and judging are definite forms of thinking and knowing” (p. 50). Bakan (2013) also claims, “songs are a form of embodied musicing in which words are married with melody, pitch, rhythm, form, and other expressive elements (e.g., dynamic, articulation, timbre) of sound” (p. 6). What Elliott and Bakan are saying is that songwriting, musical performance and songs—as forms of musicing—are “of the body,” and they come into being through the body and cannot exist without the body. As a collection of behaviours or actions, musicing is an embodied and bodily set of processes. Indeed Frith (1996) also contends, “music making and music listening...are bodily matters” (p. 123). Elliott (1995) continues, “during the continuous actions of singing or playing instruments our musical knowledge is in our actions; our musical thinking and knowing are in our musical doing and making” (p. 56). For Elliott, the actions it takes to make music are forms of knowing which reside in the body: a musician must make decisions not only using her brain but also using her *body-knowledge*, her instincts and inner-knowing to “feel” how a song should sound. As Elliott summarizes, “the actions of music making can be seen, fundamentally, as the ‘em-body-ment’ of musical thinking, knowing, and understanding” (p. 58).

Bresler (2008) also argues that embodiment is a part of music-making. Referencing the work of Burrows (1990), Rasmussen (1999), and Zuckerkandl (1956), Bresler contends:



embodiment is at the core of music. Music is produced by physical movement—the voice or an instrument that functions as the extension of the body, where the performer unites with the instrument to produce sound. Embodiment is manifested differently in sight and sound. Whereas we see things “out there,” the experience of sound, like touch and taste, is internal, “in here.” (p. 231)

This notion that the body creates sound and song, and that sound and song reside in the body invites one to consider how songs might create a lineage or genealogy. Certainly, genealogies are traced “through the body,” linking bodies (and families) together. It is pertinent here to think about the ways in which the body is both a *repository for* songs and *generator of* songs and how songs connect us to one another. If sound can not only penetrate bodies but be housed inside bodies, like the blood, other fluids, and DNA that link the bodies of a genealogy, and if emotions can be felt and shared in relational moments as songs pass between bodies, then I propose a genealogy built by the writing, singing and sharing of songs. I would like to return then to the notion of the archive and further consider the notion of “songs in the body” as it relates to queer genealogy. Bresler (2008) contends, “sound penetrates us, engaging us on a bodily level” (p. 231). Songs written by others penetrate my body and live *within* me: they are archived in my body and therefore, I can recall them in my mind and reproduce them through the act of singing. In this way then, the body is a place in which songs can be housed. My own songs are composed *by and born from* my body. These songs also live within me, just as my stories live within me as part of an archive of my life. I have often referred to the notion of “birthing a creative project,” in my case completing an album, as a process that can be likened to the gestation and birth of a baby. Composing, and then going through the labour-intensive work of recording an album feels, psychically and emotionally, similar to what it might be like to physically bring forth new life into the world from one’s body. To bring creative projects, such as a collection of songs, out from the body and into the world demands dedication, focus, and not

so much blood, but a lot of sweat, tears and yes, in the case of a singer-songwriter, some intensive breath-work. Birthing songs that are archived inside of me requires physical, emotional, creative, and psychic labour—all of which are processes of the body.

In contrast to the traditional, stationary archive, songs are *mobile archives*. They move about in our bodies with us through our daily lives. Songs are also mobile in that they pass *between* bodies. When songs are born into the world and shared through the act of singing, they become a part of other people's bodies. They move from the body of the singer-songwriter (or “musicer” as Elliott might say) to other bodies, and from those bodies to other bodies, and so on. This sharing of songs reflects the *corporeal mobility* of songs as they move between and resonate among bodies. It is this sharing of songs between bodies that constructs a genealogy through music. What I mean to say, then, is that because songs are *of* the body and can be passed *between* bodies, they can be likened to a bloodline that passes between family members. When bodies register a particular song, recognize themselves in that song, and then relate to one another and the singer through a shared experience narrated in the song, they engage in a meaning-making process with themselves and other bodies. Making meaning of music occurs in the body: the body responds physically to songs, both to the music and to the lyrics. This meaning-making process that happens creates invisible, yet palpable energetic connections between bodies, that is, between the listener and the singer. Bakan (2013) summarizes the work of Frith (1989), Sacks (2008), and Levitin (2007, 2008) and this connection between bodies through music: “the symbolic, emotional, spiritual, playful, metaphoric and dream-like neural stimulation of the music experience draws us to each other....Musical rhythms resonate with our deepest neural anatomy; musical meaning-making is biological as well as semiotic” (p. 11). Bakan (2013) posits that there is “an intimacy between music, lyric, interpretation, poetic language, and divine

communication. The sharing of deeply personal and imaginative lyrical expression facilitates a way of knowing each other” (p. 14).

Listening to, and writing and singing music drew me towards other people. It has helped me to know others and through knowing others, to understand myself. Throughout this thesis, I speak of the queer singer-songwriters and folksingers whose music impacted me greatly. Their songs entered my body and remained there. In turn, I reproduced their songs by singing and playing them on my guitar, using the songs to mentor me into both a queer life and life as a musician. I took those songs up and learned how to write my own songs. This is the genealogical characteristic of songs. Further, if queerness is also a bodily matter, that is, a way of being in one’s body and in the world, then a queer singer-songwriter can build a queer genealogy by bringing the bodily matter of being queer together with the bodily acts of writing and singing of songs.

In addition, songs disperse through time and space. The boundaries around songs are not physical in the sense that they remain in one place; rather, they possess another kind of mobility that makes experiencing and re-experiencing them instantaneously accessible. What is fascinating about the notion of songs as comprising an archive is that they are not “housed” per se, in any institution, structure, or physically grounded location. Music can be heard almost everywhere. Songs are played in homes and schools, on computers and car stereos, in headphones as we walk down the street, in public gathering places such as restaurants, bars, churches, at festivals, protests, and other events, the list goes on. Songs make their way onto the landscape of people’s lives and move with them throughout their daily lives. Not unlike companions, the songs I choose to listen to provide the soundtrack for my life: songs accompany me each day, during all manner of quotidian experience. I am reminded here of Leggo’s (2005)

essay “Pedagogy of the Heart: Ruminations on Living Poetically,” where he cites Vanier’s concept of “the accompanier”: “someone who can stand beside us on the road to freedom, someone who loves us and understands our life... anyone who can put a name to our inner pain and feelings” (p. 181). My contention here is that songs can inhabit us, accompany us and stand beside us, putting a name to our inner pain and feelings, our joys and sorrows, our wildest longings and deepest fears. When a particular piece of music resonates with me, it often feels as if the person who wrote and sang that song also *accompanies* me, not literally, but figuratively and in a felt, corporeal way, in song: I often hear their voice in my head, sing along with them out loud, and feel the presence of their message or story in my body. In this way, songs both exist in and come from the body, as mobile, auditory records that I carry with me. Like musical siblings, they accompany me throughout my life, and when I sing and perform my songs, they accompany others throughout their lives.

### **A Question of Orientation: Songwriting, Singing, and Queer Genealogies**

Since songs are archived in and come from the body, and musicing is a bodily process, it is pertinent to turn now towards another vein of the discussion on the relationship between “the body” and songwriting and singing. I invite Ahmed’s (2006) work into the conversation here, specifically her work on “orientation,”<sup>5</sup> in thinking about how artistic practices can influence how both musician and listener orient themselves in the world. Ahmed contends that orientations involve

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<sup>5</sup> I am grateful for and acknowledge Ahmed’s work on “orientation” and how she conceptualizes and makes use of it in terms of transnational and immigration politics. I use Ahmed’s work here to think more deeply about my own “queer homing,” and while I understand that race and racialization is present in queer lineages, that is not what this project is about specifically.

different ways of registering the proximity of objects and others. Orientations shape not only how we inhabit space, but how we apprehend this world of shared inhabitation, as well as “who” or “what” we direct our energy and attention toward. (p. 3)

Ahmed’s contention assists me in thinking through who I direct my energy and attention to, and how I orient myself in the world and towards myself and others through folk songs. Here, I am drawn to consider the relationship between the “embodiedness” of both music and queerness, and how I have used music to orient myself not only towards my own body, but also towards other queer bodies, and the world in general. Songwriting and singing have helped to orient me in the world, towards other bodies and myself in the sense that they helped me to feel at home with other queer bodies and in my own queer body.

Ahmed (2006) discusses Kant’s (1786) example of “walking blindfolded into an unfamiliar room” and his claim that how we orient ourselves depends on knowing the difference between the sides of our bodies. While Kant asserts that we find our way through the room blindfolded only if we are aware of these bodily sides (Ahmed, 2006, p. 6), I wonder how we find our way through unfamiliar experiences and even those experiences which are familiar and difficult when we are not necessarily aware of these “bodily sides,” or aware of where our bodies end and other bodies begin. At this point, I reflect on how I found my way when I didn’t have a solid sense of self or even a sense of my body. Many times in my life, I have felt like I was “walking blindfolded into an unfamiliar room,” where I didn’t know who I was in relation to myself or those around me; I felt “lost” or “othered” due to my sexual and gender identity; or I felt disoriented because of some challenging life experience and was unsure of how to re-orient myself. Ahmed argues, “orientation involves aligning body and space: we only know which way to turn once we know which way we are facing. If we are in a strange room, one whose contours are not part of our memory map, then the situation is not so easy” (p. 7). For queer folks,

orientation is often a challenge as our bodies are not aligned with heterosexual spaces. If the room is a straight room—as most rooms are—and one’s gender and sexual identity are not of the norm, this straight room is a strange and disorienting room. I would argue that, as a queer person, taking up space in such a room feels both familiar and strange: familiar because I have always inhabited the heterosexual world (as an insider and outsider) and strange because I sometimes feel estranged from it through my subjective experience as a queer-bodied person. Certainly, “society” and “the world,” where heterosexuality is the norm, could also be considered a “strange room” from the perspective of the queer body.

Composing and singing queer folk songs have assisted and continue to assist me in navigating what it means to walk blindfolded, as into a “straight room”; they help me navigate the world of heterosexuality from a queer place. Certainly, the women folksingers I was listening to, and to whose music I still listen, challenged and disrupted these “straight rooms.” That is why I found them so appealing: they were different from anything I had heard before, and they spoke to the difference in me. Their songs meant something to me because they came from queer bodies and spoke of queer experiences, and their songs entered my body and resonated with me in a way that other songs, that is, heterosexual-themed songs, did not. Their songs *taught* me how to name and make sense of my queer feelings. Their songs located me in a queer way of being and anchored me not only to the women who wrote and sang them but also to the legions of queer people who also listened to their music. In short, I learned how to begin to orient myself through their songs. Then, I took that learning and continued to orient myself by writing and singing my own songs.

Ahmed (2006) contends that when thinking about orientation, she is curious, “not only about how we ‘find our way’ but how we come to ‘feel at home’” (p. 6) in unfamiliar spaces.

Songwriting and singing have helped me to “find my way” in my life and the world by encouraging me to reflect on my lived experiences, writing these experiences down, translating them into music, and then singing about these experiences, again and again. As I orient myself towards my body through songwriting and singing, these practices have come to help me to “feel at home” with myself. In composing and singing songs, I turned towards myself: I recognized, became familiar with, and made sense of myself as a queer person in the world. Likewise, songwriting and singing have encouraged me to orient myself towards others, both figuratively and literally. By identifying myself as queer in my songs, I orient myself towards “those that are ‘less proximate’ or even those that deviate” (Ahmed, 2006, p. 3) from heterosexual norms. That is, in the act of thinking through, writing, and singing about my own sexual and gender identity, and by thinking about other queer bodies as I write and sing, I figuratively orient myself towards queerness and queer bodies. As well, I also orient myself, literally, toward audiences on stages: I turn my body towards and face the audience-body who, in turn, orient towards me when I sing. In using music to orient myself and my body, I have come to feel “at home.”

Likewise, when I first heard the recorded music of Indigo Girls, Ani DiFranco and Ferron, I turned my ear toward them and their songs. Then, seeing them perform in person allowed a further physical orientation: I could face real-life LGBTQ people who were out, public, and facing me, the audience and the world. It is my hope that my body in performance, in turn, fulfills that role for those who come to see and hear me sing, that it helps others orient their own bodies.

### **Vancouver Dyke March and Festival**

*When I arrived for sound check, there were some people setting up booths: vintage clothing, a VDMF booth with T-shirts, and a Queer Film Festival booth, to name a few. I*

*introduced myself to the sound guy and did my sound check to an open grassy area that had a sprinkling of people. Some were obviously eager dykes who had their mini-festival chairs set up and blankets laid out in anticipation, and others were random couples and passers-by who didn't seem to be there for the festival but sat down on the grass because it was a beautiful day to be in the park. Other than those few lesbians, the people setting up booths, the sound guy and his assistant, and the folks who had brought their kids out to play, it seemed like just any other day in Grandview Park.*

*I often feel unsettled before people start arriving at the performances I'm about to give. When there is no one there, I often fret silently in my head about how many people will arrive, if any. I'm simultaneously nervous about having to perform and worried about not having anyone to perform for, if nobody shows up. I am aware of this anxiety, this anticipation, the waiting for bodies to come through the doors, or down the path into the performance space, hoping that they will show up.*

*I am pretty sure that in order to be called a performance, a performance requires an audience. If there is no audience, can we still call it a performance? And certainly performances depend on an audience being present, as well as their collective response and participation. When thanking an audience for attending my shows, I have sometimes joked that I would look (and feel) pretty ridiculous performing on a stage to an empty room, that a performance is as much about the audience as it is about the performer, and that my job necessitates the presence of an audience. Without an audience, could I call myself a performer at all? When audiences are engaged and willing to participate by laughing, cheering, smiling, shedding some tears, nodding their heads, and then clapping with engaged enthusiasm at the end of a song, sometimes even bantering with me in between songs, it feels as though their participation helps to move my*



*performance along: their energy fuels me and I give it back to them in return. It is a reciprocal process.*

*So, there I was in Grandview Park, the “lonely I,” waiting for all of the queer bodies to show up for the festival, anxious about what was going to happen. And then, I heard it. The faint noise of bongos, chanting, and yelling coming from way down the street. The fear I felt earlier began to dissipate as a wave of relief and excitement simultaneously flooded my body. It’s happening! I always like to be somewhere where I can watch them come in because it’s such an exciting sight. The drums and chanting and yelling got louder and louder as they advanced down the street towards the park, and I started to see banners and signs and rainbow ribbons, colourfully dressed (and not so dressed!) bodies moving together en masse, through the middle of the street. I saw topless women, women in leather, crinolines, tattoos, piercings, all manner of hairstyles, cut off jean shorts, tank tops, black steel toe boots, sandals, skirts and pants; the whole spectrum of dress and colour. “Here they come! It’s Vancouver Dyke March!” I said to myself as their bodies began to fill the grassy space out in front of the stage. I felt appreciative: they had come to be entertained after their boisterous march down Commercial Drive. They were expectant and ready; they were joyful and present, here to celebrate with their friends, lovers, families, neighbours, and coworkers. I had this felt sense that they were here with me; that we were gathered for a common purpose; that their presence was a vital part of what I do, it was a necessary part of my work on this temporary stage. Without them as witnesses to my performance, without their bodies here to absorb my performance and songs through their eyes, ears and hearts, I would simply sing my songs to myself and once I was done, they would simply float away from me, beyond this space and disappear into the air. But their presence grounded me in my work and helped me re-orient myself in this makeshift queer space. Their presence*

*reminded me that we can create queer spaces when we gather together.*

*I started my set with “Uncharted Territory,” a song that I wrote in response to a couple of friends of mine who once complained that “too many of [your] songs are about being a lesbian.” Suddenly, I felt that physiological response where the hair on the back of my neck stands up, my scalp crinkles and a jolt of energy runs through my body. But it’s more than physiological, it’s like all of the intersecting lines in my life converge in that sweet moment and I am dialling into something bigger, something like a collective energy. During these moments, I can also read it in the faces of some people when I perform: I can see it on their faces when they are experiencing feelings of resonance and connection to a song. It’s quite a remarkable thing to be a part of. Sometimes, it nearly moves me to the point of tears and I have to close my eyes in order to refocus on what I am doing so that I don’t get too caught up in the emotion of what it means to do this work. This confirms for me that what I am singing about is not only important to me, it is also important to other people; that the songs really do articulate a recognition and create a sense of belonging among us. It’s as if, together, as performer and audience, we are creating new possibilities for a different kind of world and a different kind of family, a family that we are creating for ourselves.*

### **Queer Counterpublics? Subcultures? Scenes?...Kinship Through Performance of Songs**

Art forms, like music and performance, make necessary contributions to society, in particular to people who exist “on the fringe” of normative society. They build and contribute to culture and can serve as a lifeline for those who don’t see themselves represented in mainstream, “popular” culture. Songs sung about queer lives can help queer people make sense of who they are, bringing people together in groups variously defined as “subcultures,” “scenes,” and

“counterpublics.” As well, queer songs and performance can contribute not only to an archive but also to these groups in that they serve to mitigate the trauma of isolation, invisibility, and violence for both queer subjects and those who may not identify as queer but who do not align with normative beliefs, values, and ways of living. I will now discuss the notion of the “counterpublic,” which, as Warner (2002) suggests, comes together and functions as an alternative to normative, hegemonic culture. Fraser (1990) writes about “subaltern counterpublics” where “members of subordinated social groups—women, workers, peoples of color, and gays and lesbians—have repeatedly found it advantageous to constitute alternative publics<sup>6</sup>” (p. 67). Fraser contends that these counterpublics “emerge in response to exclusions within dominant publics” (p. 67) and defines them as “parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” (p. 67). I am interested in the idea that the “proliferation of counterpublics means a widening of discursive contestation” (p. 67) where counterpublics generate new languages that disrupt normative and dominant language, ideas and values. While Fraser’s work centers mainly on the notion of how minoritized subjects comprise subaltern counterpublics in relation to democratic participation, for the purposes of my writing here, I shift away from the notion of counterpublics as they relate to democratic participation. Rather, I am interested in counterpublics as a way to describe an audience that gathers for a performance. More pointedly, when queer bodies as they congregate together in a public space for a cultural event or performance, a counterpublic is formed. Certainly, queer songs performed for these queer bodies that congregate together consist of Fraser’s “counterdiscourses” in that,

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<sup>6</sup> In discussing counterpublics, Fraser’s primary concern is with people’s ability to participate in democratic society as free and equal citizens, however, I am not emphasizing democratic participation here.

lyrically, they “formulate oppositional interpretations of (queer) identities, issues and needs” and in doing so incorporate language and tell narratives that push back against normative stories. In using non-normative discourse or counterdiscourse, queer songs are what I referred to earlier as countersongs: they are songs that counter dominant, hegemonic stories and discourses of heterosexual lives. That is, queer songs tell queer stories, which help queer people account for themselves and find their way among the very public proliferation of songs about heterosexual lives.

Cvetkovich (2003) discusses the importance of sharing traumatic lesbian histories in public domains and emphasizes the importance of bringing the traumatic life experiences of lesbians into the public arena, explaining that these cultures reinforce their own vibrancy and resilience, rendering them visible. Living in a queer or lesbian body can certainly be traumatic in the face of isolation, discrimination, othering, and violence that can and is experienced by those who inhabit non-normative bodies. Cvetkovich argues, “lesbian public cultures” or “lesbian sites” “forge creative responses” to trauma (p. 3). She claims, “these public cultures have taken sexuality out of the bedroom and the intimacy of the couple and made it the focus of collective conversations” (p. 4). She contends that performances of lived lesbian traumas are integral to blurring the boundary between private and public and calls for “the presence and promise of cultural formations that bring traumatic histories into the public sphere and use accounts of affective experience to transform our sense of what constitutes a public sphere” (p. 16).

Cvetkovich’s work resonates with mine, not so much around her focus on trauma but in that I am interested in “how publics are formed in and through cultural archives,” where these archives include everyday traces and artifacts, and not only the records and documents more commonly deemed important (p. 9). I am also interested in how “performance cultures and queer publics are

mutually constituting” (p. 9), and even more specifically, how performer and audience are mutually constituting. To that end, I am curious about queer songs as points of connection between queer bodies that come together in public spaces to witness the singing of songs, and how queer kinship can be formed in the sharing of songs. Composing an archive of queer songs is what has assisted me in accounting for myself, and as I sing and perform these songs for others, it helps them account for their lives.

Queer performances bring actual queer people together, that is, they bring queer bodies together. It is because of the performance of the songs that these bodies come together. Jill Dolan (2011), in her work on performance and theatre, writes that “queer performance creates publics by bringing together live bodies in space, and the theatrical experience is not just about what’s on stage but also about who’s in the audience creating community” (as cited in Cvetkovich, 2003, p. 9). The coming together of queer bodies to witness a performance is integral to that performance. Performance and audience are mutually constitutive: the performance creates the audience and, in turn, the audience shapes performance. It is the bodies in the audience that congregate, orienting themselves towards one another during a performance. Ahmed (2004) also argues, “queer bodies gather in spaces, through the pleasure of opening up to other bodies. These queer gatherings involve forms of activism; ways of claiming back the street, as well as the spaces of clubs, bars, parks and homes” (p. 165). When I think about many of my performances that have taken place in clubs, bars, parks, and homes, I witness the coming together of queer bodies in the public spaces in which I perform: queer bodies that congregate in order to be a part of and witness a performance. They are drawn together in their desire to hear queer songs and witness a queer performance. What I am trying to say is that queer songs, then, attract bodies to other bodies: they bring bodies together in public spaces, bodies that have a shared lived

experience insofar that they identify as queer or lesbian. Indeed, I have formed lasting friendships with queer and lesbian women I have met not only through my own music but also through the music of other queer and lesbian musicians at places like Michigan Womyn's Music Festival (which most certainly was a counterpublic space). Further, queer songs also attract queer bodies together in *cyberspace*. I have noticed that in the discursive arenas of social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook, queer people “gather” and “congregate” around conversations about songs and upcoming or previous performances I have given. I notice the connections being made between queer bodies and the kinship lines being drawn because of a shared experience with a particular song, album, and/or performance. This is certainly true of all musicians whose work is public—people gather together through their shared appreciation of a particular musician(s) or style of music. These counterpublics, whether in virtual or actual space, could be likened to “family gatherings,” where people who are connected through shared lived experience come together and form kinship ties through music.

At this juncture, I would like to briefly discuss the notions of “subculture” and “scene” as they relate to music-making, performance, and counterpublic. Halberstam (2003) has argued that people who comprise queer subcultures live “outside of the conventional, forward-moving narratives of birth, marriage, reproduction, and death” (p. 314). Halberstam goes on to suggest that the definition of “subcultures” departs from the notion of “community” in that subcultures “provide a critique of the seemingly organic nature of ‘community,’ and they make visible the forms of un-belonging and disconnection that are necessary to the creation of community” (p. 314). Rather than a seemingly more enduring notion of “community,” subcultures “suggest transient, extra-familial and oppositional modes of affiliation” (p. 315). Certainly, the subcultures with which I come in contact through performance are transient in that they come

together in response to a public concert or festival and are comprised of people to whom I am unrelated through family of origin, and who don't ascribe to normative ways of being, thinking and/or identifying. There is a kind of resistance to the larger, dominant notion of "a culture" implied by the prefix "sub." "Sub" has a number of meanings: "below," "under," and "imperfectly," to name a few, and because of some shared interests, values, and attributes that are not shared with the dominant culture, a subculture represents a conscious splitting off from that larger culture. A subculture often occurs in opposition to the larger culture. In these ways, "subculture," then, is similar to the notion of "counterpublic."

Taylor (2012) works with the notion of "queer scenes," which "cannot be easily aligned with a particular genre of expression" (p. 152). She describes queer scenes as "displaying a distinctively do-it-yourself ethic [and] quite often impermanent and transitory, operating 'under the radar,' congregating semi-regularly at available-for-hire locations, in illegal, abandon [*sic*] or hijacked spaces, and in private residences" (p. 152). A "queer scene" then, allows for more uncertainty of identities and modes of expression. Except for the fact that they reject heteronormative discourses, codes, and ways of sexual expression and identity, queer scenes, according to Taylor, don't claim cohesion or feelings of belonging through some shared experiences or identities because "membership cuts across multiple socio-economic indicators" (p. 154). Taylor takes up Halberstam's work on subcultures and also diverts from it when she claims that subcultures are formed in relation to the dominant culture, whereas queer scenes are not. She argues, "where a subculture is locked into an oppositional binary relationship to a parent culture, scene acknowledges the more flexible relationship that queer assumes in relation to multiple cultural expressions" (p. 153). Here, Taylor notes that queer scenes are not birthed as a reaction to the larger culture per se, but rather are the expression and result of a coming together

of people with a range of cultural and social lived experiences who are not part of the hegemonic, dominant culture. She goes on to speak about the way that queer scenes often comprise a range of styles, class backgrounds, and ages, referring back to Halberstam's (2005) notion of "queer time."

Whether counterpublic, subculture, or scene, queer songs help queer bodies "find their way" to one another, and a queer kinship between these bodies is produced through the performance and sharing of these songs. Songs, then, become the homing devices for others that when performed in public, draw queer bodies together to create a counterpublic. Queer songs are precisely about queerness: they re/present queer stories and voice through song, bringing queer bodies into focus. They also bring queer identities, stories, and histories into the public sphere through music, creating a space for identities of difference and in doing so transform what the public sphere "looks like." The public performance of these songs redefines the heterosexualized public sphere because it attracts queer people into these public spaces where we orient towards and foster kinships with other queer bodies. This is one of the ways a queer counterpublic forms—through the performance of queer songs. This is not to say that people who do not identify as queer do not also congregate at these performances or that kinship is not formed between bodies regardless of how they identify. However, for the purposes of this thesis, I am focusing solely on the way that the performance of queer songs provides a space in public for queer bodies to gather and relate to one another.

The queer songs I perform in public are a telling, a sharing of *my* experiences and stories of queer life, but they are also a telling and retelling of the stories of the people with whom I come in contact. As mobile, embodied cultural records of queer lived experience that are shared



between bodies, they contribute to a passing-down of queer lineage. The songs I compose build on the songs of other songwriters I listened to such as Indigo Girls, Ani DiFranco, and Ferron. They contribute to a history of queer and lesbian songwriting and performing that has been in existence for decades for indeed, this history harkens back to the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s and onward to the 1950s with Black blues singers such as Ma Rainey and Lucille Bogan who sang lesbian-themed songs, and Gladys Bentley who often performed in tuxedos and top hats, clothing atypical for women at the time (“Femme Noire,” 2014). My songs and the songs of other queer and lesbian musicians document and record the existence of queer lives, and as queer stories sung in public about queer sexualities, they build an archive that calls together and sustains a queer public. Singing, recording, distributing, and performing queer folk songs in public exemplifies an insistence on contributing to the archiving of queer lives and the documentation of queer history. This insistence in documenting queer lives in song helps queer bodies find their way towards an understanding of themselves, and further, it helps them find their way to other queer bodies. Queer songs help queer bodies locate one another and provide us with a sense of kinship. These songs contribute to the voicing of queerness in public spaces and to the “grassroots archive” of queer folk music, which is a “site of lesbian public culture” (Cvetkovich, 2003, p. 3) and queer public culture, more generally.

### **Somewhere in the Air Over the Rocky Mountains**

*I'm on the flight home. I am exhausted and I can't wait to sleep in my own bed. What a trip. I don't even know if I can type much right now, I'm that tired. Last night, after spending five days as the artist-in-residence at Camp fYrefly, a summer leadership camp for queer, trans\* and allied youth, I did a house concert in Calgary. The two women who hosted the house concert*

*have been listening to my music since about 2008, I think. They were telling me over lunch yesterday about this show I did back in 2009, in a strip mall in south Calgary at a bar called the Baja Bar and Grill. It was the first time they saw me perform. I remember that night well. On that tour, I had booked a couple of shows in Alberta with a local Calgary musician—another lesbian singer-songwriter. We were originally booked to play at Money Pennies, the local dyke drinkery, where I had performed at a few times before. But unfortunately, a couple of days ahead of our show, the place got shut down by the city on account of some health and safety infraction. So, my musical companion found the Baja at the last minute and we ended up moving the show there. It definitely was a bit of a rough place and when we pulled up, I remember wondering to myself if we were going to run into some trouble that night, being lesbian musicians and all, and singing in a place like this. In fact, it was this place that inspired me to write some of the lyrics for the song, “Captain Cupcake and the Cambie Hotel.” It had a similar feel to The Cambie in Nanaimo, and similar clientele: lots of biker dudes, a smattering of long-haired, tight-panted, made-up women inside, and motorbikes lined up outside. It smelled like the kind of place where a lot of beer had been spilled and a lot of cigarettes had been smoked. In fact, this place was the inspiration for the lyric: “I thought to myself, ‘this could turn out to be one hell of a night.’ I better leave my car engine running and tie my shoes up real tight” (Captain Cupcake and the Cambie Hotel, 2011). I definitely felt a little out of place in this rough, redneck saloon, and noticed a slight pang of concern for my safety and the safety of the women who would be joining us that night.*

*With sound check done, I began my set. As soon as I started playing, all the women who had arrived for the show moved up to the front, toward the stage to dance. The biker dudes also moved up to the front, with expectant looks on their faces, like they couldn’t believe their luck.*

*The biker dudes were smiling and began dancing, surrounded by all these women, women they had never seen before, at their local watering hole! And then, as I kept singing, it dawned on me: these guys thought they had hit the jackpot. They were surrounded by a horde of available straight women and they thought they were going to get lucky tonight! Well, no sooner did I have that realization, when something shifted in the room. I saw the looks on their faces change dramatically. I could see the wheels begin to turn in their brains as they started to take stock of what was happening around them—they began to notice that the women were dancing and having a good time with one another. Maybe it was a particular lyric I sang that alerted them, or maybe they picked up on a different energy from these women than they were used to. Either way, I watched the light bulbs go on, one by one, in each of their heads, as if someone had just flicked a switch. They were dancing with a crowd of lesbians! The colour drained instantly from their faces and then, almost like some strange choreographed dance move, all of them turned around and quietly slinked to the back of the bar together, their proverbial tails between their legs. They knew they were not only barking up the wrong tree, and that their usual tricks wouldn't work in this crowd, but that they were also outnumbered, by a whole group of women who couldn't be less interested in them. When my song was done, I made some joke about the biker dudes finally realizing that we were queer, and the audience burst out laughing. They all noticed it, too. After that, I wasn't so worried about our safety. It seemed that the biker dudes suddenly just knew that they couldn't mess with us, and clearly, they didn't want to. And, well, they were probably just harmless guys anyway.*

*But perhaps they learned something that night. Perhaps they learned that in some settings, they are not as central as they believe themselves to be and that women don't always need them in order to have a good time. And maybe they learned something about us: that queer*

*chicks and lesbians exist, and that we congregate in unexpected public places. And maybe we learned something about us, too: that we find each other—even in rough biker dives like the Baja Bar and Grill in south Calgary; that there is something to the phrase “strength in numbers”; and that it’s damn fun being “the majority” now and then, even as our fears about being targeted for being queer still reside in the backs of our minds.*

*And me? I will always remember the night the lesbians took over the biker bar in Calgary.*

### **Chapter 3: “I Picked It Up and Held it Close”: Methodologies of Words and Music**

*I'm writing this from my seat squeezed in between two students on the 99 B-Line bus that is jam-packed with bodies as it lurches towards campus like a can of sardines on wheels. Before boarding the bus, I checked my email on my phone. In my inbox was a message from my younger sister. The subject heading said, “Be prepared.” I knew it had to do with my Uncle Jim,<sup>7</sup> my mother's brother, who had been admitted to Sunnybrook Hospital in Toronto a few days ago. In fact, I figured my sister's email was going to be a description of how Jim had passed away. She told me earlier today on a phone conversation that it was becoming clear to her, my mom (Jim's sister), and my mom's other brother, that Jim was dying. I wasn't prepared for the news contained in her email; I mean, I didn't think it was really going to affect me the way it did. After all, I hadn't seen the guy in nearly 20 years. And, it wasn't like he and I were close. It's not like we hung out and talked about stuff, like relationships, family issues, or life experiences. I left Ontario over 20 years ago and we hadn't stayed in touch.*

*I did like my Uncle Jim, even though I really didn't know much about him—I saw him rather infrequently while I was growing up. He would join us for Christmases when he would come out from Toronto on the Greyhound for the big family dinner. And occasionally, he would travel to Cambridge to stay with my grandparents for the weekend. On these weekends, he would accompany them on their Sunday visit out to our farm, which was about a 20-minute drive from Cambridge. But mostly, he was a pretty private man. All of his adult life, he had been a travel*

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<sup>7</sup> Not his real name.

*agent, living in the same small, one bedroom apartment off Yonge Street in Toronto, an apartment that I remember visiting once in the 23 years I lived in Ontario before I hightailed it out to Vancouver in '94. I remember the walls of his apartment displayed various curios and unusual wooden figures carved out of dark wood from faraway places to which he had travelled for work purposes, places I had never been.*

*Jim was quirky and eccentric in his own way. When he smoked, his cigarettes would rest between his long, thin, perfectly manicured fingers—fingers that were like Nana's (his mother, my grandmother), except more delicate, and without the polish. As smoke would curl around his slight frame, he would bitch (I use that word deliberately) and complain, in a soft, nasal voice, about pretty much anything. He was rather quiet, and he seemed to resemble my grandmother more than he did my grandfather or any of the other men in the Reid family for that matter. Jim didn't seem like your typical "man's man." He also didn't pretend he was happy or even act happy, because I don't think he really was. At least, he didn't appear to be happy, which is perhaps why I found him so appealing. He seemed more down to earth and real in a way that was different from my other family members. Basically, he was a cranky, skinny, cigarette-smoking travel agent who lived his entire adult life alone in a tiny apartment in downtown Toronto. And, just last week after the doctors at Sunnybrook had run a bunch of tests on him, Jim was diagnosed with HIV. He was 75 years old. Suddenly, the mystery of his life was beginning to come into focus. Perhaps, he wasn't as "real" as I had once believed him to be.*

*He never had a girlfriend, just women who were friends. Nor did he ever speak of an intimate or significant other: he mostly just talked about his male "friends." Peculiar, yes, but not enough that anyone in our family ever knew for sure whether he was gay. Besides, we just weren't that kind of family, the kind of family that had gay people in it. Well, ok, when we were*

*young adults, my sister and I talked a few times about the possibility of Jim being gay. But we never asked him, and he never disclosed anything. I discovered in talking with my mom about Jim and his recent diagnosis that she had tried, by dropping hints over the years, to get him to open up about his life and friends, to try and coax him to come out of the closet. But she never directly asked him either, and he never spoke about it. Not once. He offered no insight into his personal life, ever. My mom recounts calling him up over the years, to catch up over the phone in the evenings. But, there were evenings where he wouldn't answer the phone. Then, he would call back the next day and tell her that he was out walking at night. She would comment to him how she didn't think it was safe for him—a slender, older, unimposing man—to be out walking late at night in Toronto, alone. But, he would just shrug it off. Little did my mom know that on those nights when Jim didn't answer his phone, he was out cruising men in the local gay bars. She found this out after contacting one of his friends to let him know that Jim was in the hospital and that he had HIV. This friend revealed to my mom that Jim cruised a lot, even up until the time he was admitted to the hospital. My mom became worried, wondering if Jim's friend knew any of the men that Jim had been with—that they should be contacted about Jim's condition and their possible exposure to HIV. Jim's friend said he didn't know any of them, that Jim was very private about his exploits.*

*As I ponder Jim's life, I'm guessing that he knew very well that revealing his sexuality to our family and just being out in general probably would have been very difficult for him. It was a precarious time for gays and lesbians back in the 70s and 80s, even with all the activism that was happening around LGBTQ rights. But we weren't an activist family: we were a middle-class family who strived to appear as normal as possible. If Jim ever had come out, I'm sure my mom would have been ok with it, and probably Nana would have been, too. But I'm not so sure his*

*brothers or his father—my grandfather—would have been ok with it. They were pretty typical, masculinized guys who I bet would have been threatened by the thought of having an out, gay man in the family. I'm pretty sure my grandfather would have declined to talk about it at all because anytime an awkward moment or challenging family issue arose, his response was to walk away whistling or singing to himself in the hopes that, whatever the issue was, it would simply dissipate into thin air.*

*So, when Jim was admitted to the hospital for health problems a couple weeks ago, it was my sister who asked that the doctors test him for HIV. She's smart that way. When it was confirmed, he didn't want anyone to know about it so he asked the doctor not to tell anyone. But, the doctor had to tell my mom, as she was in the midst of trying to find a palliative care facility that would take him in. And my sister told me that my mom was so good with it all; that she didn't even skip a beat when she heard the news. She simply carried on with Jim as though nothing was wrong. Yet as supportive as my mom was—talking about his HIV meds with him as if it were the most normal thing in the world—Jim would insist that he had no idea how he had even contracted the disease. My sister recounted that, on one particular night after he had come to from a bout of dementia, Jim's hand gestures were the most exaggerated she had ever seen: almost as if he was finally being himself, she said. She said they never talked about his life or asked him any questions: what mattered then was being in the moment with him and caring for him as he rapidly approached the end of his life. But, the truth was out. He was out. Inadvertently. My mom said the saddest thing about it all was that she never really got to know her brother.*

*As I read my sister's email and looked at the photos she attached of Jim—pale, thin and haggard-looking, lying on his hospital bed—I became keenly aware of a torrent of sorrow that*



*was beginning to flood my chest, sorrow at the knowledge that not only had Jim lived his entire life in secrecy, cut off in many ways from having full, honest relationships with his family members, but that I, too, had been swindled out of the possibility of having a gay elder to look up to, someone with whom I could talk about “gay things” and what it meant to want to live our lives—Jim’s and mine—differently from the ways of living and loving in which we had been immersed in rural, southern Ontario. I had been cheated out of a deeper connection with my Uncle Jim, a man I never really got to know, who was now lying helpless and dying in a hospital bed in Sunnybrook Hospital, over 3000 kilometers away. My throat tightened with a lump of sadness, as I felt an overwhelming sense of loss and grief, for his life and mine, and for a connection that never was. I was reminded once again of homophobia’s insidious grip, like tentacles that wrap themselves around us, trying to choke the life from our bodies. Looking out the window of the bus, I wept silently all the way home, praying no-one would notice.*

### **Setting the Stage: A Different Kind of Family Tree and a Mixed Methodology**

In this thesis, I endeavour to “articulate what is unsaid, unknown and/or excessive” (Irwin, 2008, p. 73). Certainly, my life as a queer person and the lives of many people with non-normative identities like my Uncle Jim, have been, in many ways, unsaid, unknown, and excessive. Irwin’s claim is similar to Cvetkovich’s (2003) interest in “venturing into the terrain of the unsaid” (p. 108). Articulating what is “unsaid, unknown and/or excessive” or articulating that which is *unsonged* is an important aspect to the storytelling I engage with in my songwriting and performance practices. I need to make a distinction here between what I mean by “unsonged” and the word “unsung.” *Unsung* is defined in the online Free Dictionary as 1. *Not honoured or praised, uncelebrated: an unsung hero*; 2. *Not sung: unsung hymns*. When

something (or someone) is unsung, there is a feeling that the thing exists but it has not been acknowledged or literally sung about. When something is “unsonged,” on the other hand, it has not yet been brought into being and must be done so by the artistic processes of writing, composing, and singing. Therefore, when something is “unsonged,” it has not been carefully pondered and then recorded or archived both in writing and in music so that people can access it over and over. When a story is “songed,” then, it *comes to life*: to “song” something is to engage in a process of bringing something into being and then sharing it with others through the act of singing.

In attempting to think through the genealogy of my queerness, I trace my queer family tree through music. It is important here for me to acknowledge the love and support I have received from members of my immediate family around the journey I have gone through with regards to my sexual and gender identity. They have embraced both me and my (queer) relationships, have not once said anything disparaging to me about my sexual and gender identity and have entered into conversations with me about sexual and gender identity, politics, and ideas. I am grateful for this and I feel fortunate as I am well aware that this is still not always the case for queer people and their families of origin (Abramovich, 2013; Bernstein & Reimann, 2001).

To be sure, my queer family tree is not built like a traditional family tree,

which is made out of the vertical lines that “show” the blood tie, the line of descent that connects parents and children, and the horizontal lines that “show” the tie between husband and wife, and between siblings. The “hope” of the family tree, otherwise known as the “wish” for reproduction, is that the vertical line will produce a horizontal line, from which further vertical lines will be drawn. (Ahmed, 2006, p. 83)

My queer family tree didn’t originate from one relationship between a woman and man, two parents who together produced offspring who, in turn, produced further offspring. It didn’t begin

with intimate pairings of heterosexual bodies: with a seed and some soil, and a bit of sun and rain. It didn't grow proudly towards the sky, straight and stalwart, spreading its leaves and branches out like the arborescent patterns of dendrites dispersed through stones. My queer family tree has its origins in a different kind of soil—a soil that was layered with curiosity and shame, longing and fear. It also began with the seeds of music and words, an album of songs—an Indigo Girls' self-titled album—which I first heard in 1993: seeds that germinated slowly, without my conscious awareness at first, accompanied by a host of uncomfortable feelings, like something yet to be known was stirring deep inside my being. My queer family tree begins with folk music, women's music, songs, and songwriters, followed by my own practices of writing and musicing. From there, I began to think through and theorize how one's genealogy could be constructed through the artistic practices of songwriting and singing.

Because I focus on queer stories that are translated into musical form and delivered to publics through the practices of songwriting and performance, my approach to inquiry then requires a methodology that can address the qualities of these artistic practices and artifacts. In turn, making meaning out of these practices and artifacts in social contexts is what leads me to carry out this project using a qualitative research methods approach. Hesse-Biber (2014) contends,

the logic of qualitative research is concerned with in-depth understanding and usually involves working with small samples. The goal is to look at a “process” or the “meanings” individuals attribute to the given social situation, not necessarily to make generalizations. (p. 192)

My qualitative research design includes a combination of three methodologies: arts-based research, autoethnographic writing, and analytic interpretation of a selection of songs from my repertoire. First, I included autoethnographic “field” accounts of performing and songwriting, in

narrative and poetic format of my lived experiences in relation to others as they pertain to my research questions; second, I chose several songs from my repertoire that helped to trace the queer relations and lineage I have developed; and third, I analyzed these songs in the context of my research questions to further elucidate how the songs and the stories that contextualize them are relevant to the overall thesis. I will now discuss the methodologies I have used to carry out this project.

### **Booking the Venue: Why Arts-Based Research?**

Because my research has been centred on the artistic practices of songwriting and singing, the research and methodological focus of this project is arts-based. Lawrence Stenhouse (1988) argues, “all good art is an inquiry and an experiment... The artist is the researcher par excellence” (as cited in McCrary Sullivan, 2012, p. 43). As an artist, I was unaware that there was a name in the academy for what I have been doing as a musician for many years now. By writing and singing songs about my life and the lives of those around me, I have been engaging in inquiry and experimentation: I have been “researching my life” through the practices of songwriting and performance. Specifically, for this project, I have inquired more systematically into my artistic practices of songwriting and performance and the cultures in which I engage in these practices; I have examined select songs from my repertoire; I have made a case for the construction of a queer genealogy through the artistic practices of songwriting and singing; and I have presented my work in a variety of artistic modes of writing, that is, narratively, poetically, musically, and lyrically.

Furthermore, arts-based research and methods appeal to me because, not unlike the theorizing of a queer genealogy, they are disruptive. First, this kind of research

enacts standpoint epistemologies that see the world from the point of view of oppressed persons of color, women, and gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered [*sic*] persons, and research advances political movements based in critical race theories and social justice activism. (Denzin, 2003, cited in Finley, 2008, p. 7)

What Denzin is saying here is that arts-based research, more often than not, is conducted from the perspectives of those who are not part of the dominant, hegemonic groups and as such is centred on hopes of advancements in social justice. Sinner, Leggo, Irwin, Gouzouasis, and Grauer (2006) also claim that arts-based research is “an inquiry laden process focused on opening up spaces to trouble and address differences through creative acts” (p. 1237). Arguing for a queer genealogy that is constructed through music fits nicely into this theme.

Second, Finley (2008) claims that arts-based research can “explore multiple, new, and diverse ways of understanding and living in the world” (p. 71). Thus, arts-based methods and research work to trouble more traditional modes of epistemology, allowing for more diverse ways of knowing and a more wide-ranging definition of what constitutes research. As Barone and Eisner (2012) assert, arts-based research endeavours to “broaden the conceptions not only of the tools that can be used to represent the world but even more to redefine and especially to enlarge the conceptual umbrella that defines the meaning of research itself” (p. 2). I have used songwriting and singing to know, understand, and represent the social world. Further, these practices can be viewed as research tools: songwriting and singing have urged me to ask questions, and have assisted me in making sense of myself and the social world. In this way, my queer songs and performances, in and of themselves, are examples of arts-based research.

Finley (2008) also claims,

at the heart of arts-based inquiry is a radical, politically grounded statement about social justice and control over the production and dissemination of knowledge. By calling upon artful ways of knowing and being in the world, arts-based researchers make a rather

audacious challenge to the dominant, entrenched academic community and its claims to scientific ways of knowing. (p. 72)

Here, she says that arts-based research challenges canonical modes of research and knowledge-sharing. Centering this thesis on artistic practices like narrative, songwriting and singing as a way to answer research questions challenges the “entrenched academic community and its claims to scientific ways of knowing.” I use “artful ways of knowing” to write and sing the stories of my experiences and the experiences of people I know and love, in non-academic spaces such as live music venues, festivals, people’s homes, in public school systems, at summer camps, and so on. Indeed, Finley (2008) argues, “arts-based methodologies bring both arts and social inquiry out of the elitist institutions of academe and art museums, and relocate inquiry within the realm of local, personal, everyday places and events” (p. 72). As I experience and make sense of myself and the social world through the practices of songwriting and performance, using an arts-based approach to research makes sense because it highlights “diverse ways of knowing and experiencing the world” (p. 79).

As traditional research practices are often “of the mind”—that is, engaged with research as brain-work—engaging in artistic practice is an embodied practice: it engages the body and therefore, as *body-work*, arts-based research brings the researcher back into the body, in connection with the knowledge that resides in the body. As I discussed in Chapter 3, musicing is necessarily a bodily practice. By employing an arts-based method to inform my project, I seek to expand my understanding of what it means to exist in the world as a queer body, and further what it means to exist and work as an *artist* body within queer subcultures and how experiences related to these subject positions help me to account for myself. Further, emotions, as a form of bodily knowledge, are certainly a part of these experiences. Songwriting and singing, therefore,

assist me in accessing emotions, which in turn help me to comprehend the social world around me. Barone and Eisner (2012) contend that arts-based research “emphasizes the generation of forms of feeling that have something to do with understanding some person, place or situation...It is the conscious pursuit of expressive form in the service of understanding” (p. 7). Artistic practices provide me access to a range of feelings and ideas to which I might not otherwise have access. As a form of knowledge production, songwriting and singing open me up to different levels of feeling and understanding that other forms of knowledge production do not allow me to do. Regarding research, it follows then that research that arts-based research addresses

complex and often subtle interactions and...provides an image of those interactions in way that makes them noticeable. In a sense, arts-based research is a heuristic through which we deepen and make more complex our understanding of some aspect of the world. (Barone & Eisner, 2012, p. 3)

This links nicely to the idea that one can build a queer genealogy through the act of musicing, in this case by composing and singing songs. I am able to access deeper and more complex understandings of the social world and my place in it through practices like songwriting and singing. These practices also allow me to expand, deepen and make more complex my understanding of how I have been constructing a queer lineage by fostering queer kinships with other people and a familial sense of belonging through songwriting and performance.

Finally, Barone and Eisner (2012) assert that arts-based research “represents an effort to explore the potentialities of an approach to representation that is rooted in aesthetic considerations and that, when it is at its best, culminates in the creation of something close to a work of art” (p. 1). In this project, I bring together a selection of songs I chose to analyze and examples of performances I narrated, along with stories that contextualize the songs and journal

entries that narrate some of my experiences related to songwriting, performance, queerness, and kinship. As I write about this collection of artistic practices, I also aim to “create something close to a work of art” in the way that I write about and present my research and findings. To be sure, arts-based research is research that is conducted through forms of art rather than through other discourse (Barone & Eisner, 2012, p. 1). Folk songs are an artistic form that combines language and story with a host of musical elements such as tempo, melody, harmony, and rhythm. As folk songs marry music and lyrics, they become stories told in the artistic form of music. As well, singing and musical performance is an artistic form that conveys emotions and ideas, and communicates stories: performance is enactment of stories experienced through and by the body.

Taking an arts-based approach in the project, then, follows Finley’s (2003) description of this type of research which “begins by envisioning a research approach, engaging in inquiry (questions emerge over time), selecting sources of information and ideas, and then offering interpretations with ‘intellectual openness and creativity’ within practice, in essence, portraying new understandings textually, visually, and/or performatively” (cited in Sinner et al., 2006, p. 1225). I have engaged in artful knowing and inquiry by including stories, poetry, song lyrics, and journal entries in order to tell the story of my research and portray the new understandings I have come to in this process. Arts-based research helped me to make sense of my artistic practice and are the foundation upon which to theorize a queer genealogy through music. At the core of my methodological framework, arts-based methods have assisted me in tracking and making meaning of my lived experience of musicing; allowed me to articulate the impact music has had on my life and musical practices; and finally, enabled me to examine my relations and kinship with queer subcultures, artists, and particular songs. Sinner et al.’s (2006) claim about conducting arts-based research, that “researchers are immersed in a journey of discovery, of



learning about themselves as well as learning about themselves in relations to others” (p. 1242), resonates with me. The process of this research has proved a meaningful learning experience for me as an artist. I took the time to pay attention to and articulate the variety of processes that I engage in when I am producing a work of art through the acts of songwriting and performing and how the production of these works connects me to others and vice versa. Tracing my experiences of songwriting and performing also assisted me in exploring the uniqueness of some of the performative and embodied aspects of songs—mine and others’—and their contribution to the artistic lineaging of a queer genealogy through music.

### **Writing a “Set List”: Using Autoethnographic Methods**

I have engaged in a variety of writing practices such as journal writing, poetry, and songwriting for many years. It was 1984 when, in the eighth grade, I discovered that writing down my secrets in the cream-coloured pages of my diary pointed the way towards understanding my relationships with others and myself. Looking back, writing in my diary was the beginning of trying to recognize, make sense of, and account for myself. And certainly, my diary became a place where I could write the things that I could not always say aloud. Writing became a way for me to access the feelings and truths inside of me about which I was unable to speak yet, and the experiences I had difficulty articulating with the oral word. As Rowe (2014) contends “narratives bring worlds into being” (p. 56).

Since then, various forms of writing (songwriting, journaling, poetry and storywriting) have assisted me in tracking and documenting a range of social and relational experiences throughout my life. On using writing as a way to uncover and recover knowledge, Laurel Richardson (2001) claims:

*writing is a method of discovery*, a way of finding out about yourself and your world. When we view writing as a *method*, we experience “language-in-use,” how we “word the world” into existence...and then, we “reword the world”...this “worded world” never accurately, precisely, completely captures the studied world, yet we persist in trying...writing as a method of inquiry honours and encourages the trying. (cited in Gough, 2008, p. 341, emphasis in original)

Writing often leads me to unexplored, rich places of knowing and helps me articulate experiences and feelings that I had not previously understood until I wrote them on the page. There is something about the process of writing ideas, thoughts, and feelings, or “wording the world” in the form of journal entries, stories, poems, and songs that helps me access new understandings, and assists me in making sense of my self in relation to others. I’m reminded here of Leggo’s (2007) hope that “words will invite others to enter into dialogical relationships of word-making founded on risk-taking, trust, truth-seeking, courage, encouragement, nurture, desire, and unwavering commitment to the power of words for singing our worlds into creation” (p. 30). Indeed, I have been “singing my world” since I began writing my own songs. When I write and sing songs about my life and relationships with others, I literally “sing my world into creation.” Then, by recording these songs and singing publicly, I also invite others to join with me in singing their own worlds into creation. As Richardson (2001) notes, “I write because I want to find something out. I write in order to learn something that I did not know before I wrote it” (cited in Gough, 2008, p. 341). It follows then that writing about my experiences as a way to conduct research would be a suitable method to assist me in tracking any ideas, insights, feelings and further questions that may arise during and after my research processes. Julia Ellis (1998) speaks to the importance of the role of writing in research. She contends:

writing has a significant role in this process of interpreting the data our explorations produce...often, the insights and connections emerge from the very process of writing itself. Thus, one can and should begin the writing without knowing everything one will say or write about. (p. 6)

Carolyn Ellis (2004) also argues for the importance of writing in assisting researchers and writers uncover and explore their lived experiences when she states it “is the way we remember the past, turn life into language, and disclose to ourselves and others the truth of our experiences” (p. 126).

As a mode of research that is based in the act of writing, autoethnography aims to illuminate a particular culture by writing about the self in relation to that culture. I have incorporated various samples of autoethnographic, narrative writing in this thesis as my research—journal entries, poems, stories, and song lyrics. Autoethnographic writing is a form of autobiographical writing but one that focuses particularly on the relational aspects of one’s life: it is about understanding relationships between people in a given (sub)culture and how those relationships contribute to that (sub)culture. Autoethnography is a research methodology that combines the processes of research, writing, and gathering of artifacts, for example, memory boxes, field notes, journals, poems, stories and photographs (Chang, 2008), culminating in a final display and analysis of the research. In this way, it is “both process and product” (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011, p. 1), both a methodology and a finished product or artifact. Ellis (2004) and Holman Jones (2005) outline autoethnography as an approach to research and writing “that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (*graphy*) personal experience (*auto*) in order to understand cultural experience (*ethno*)” (cited in Ellis et al., 2011, p. 1). Because autoethnography involves studying oneself with the goal of understanding a broader culture, participating in the research, collecting written data of one’s experiences, and reflecting on those experiences within larger cultural contexts *becomes* the research. This goal of comprehensive self-examination of autoethnographic writing, then, is to articulate a much deeper “cultural understanding of self and others directly and indirectly connected to self” (Chang, 2008, p. 49).

Autoethnographic methods produce what Ellis et al. (2011) refer to as “aesthetic and evocative thick descriptions of personal and interpersonal experience” (p. 5) to tell the story of my lifelong engagement with music, and more recently, my involvement in queer subcultures through the artistic practices of songwriting and performance. Rowe (2014) contends that “thick description provides a researcher with the tools to not only describe the culture to an outsider but also allows them to articulate the behaviour within the culture in which the behaviour takes place” (p. 50). By focusing on personal and interpersonal experience, autoethnographic accounts provide a deeper understanding of culture and one’s experience and place within that culture. Not only are the excerpts of writing included in this thesis autoethnographic, but my songs are also autoethnographic in that they, as Ellis and Bochner (2000) put it, “self-consciously explore the interplay of the introspective, personally engaged self with cultural descriptions mediated through language, history, and ethnographic explanation” (cited in Chang, 2008, p. 2). Using songwriting, singing, and narrative writing has allowed me to be introspective and personally engaged with the cultural descriptions and social relations that I discuss in this thesis. This writing about and reflecting on my experiences within certain cultures has helped me to further understand and make sense of the dominant heterosexual and various queer subcultures within which I am situated and further, how the social relations I am engaged in help me to account for myself. In this way, the songwriting and singing I have done, and continue to do, are forms of autoethnographic exploration.

Ellis et al. (2011) continue by saying that in the search for a different way of carrying out research, scholars turned to autoethnography because they

wanted to concentrate on ways of producing meaningful, accessible, and evocative research grounded in personal experience, research that would sensitize readers to issues

of identity politics, to experiences shrouded in silence, and to forms of representation that deepen our capacity to empathize with people who are different from us. (p. 2)

This statement is relevant to this project in that these scholars claim that by looking through the lens of personal accounts and experience, autoethnography is a valuable tool in understanding cultures and the people that comprise them. When we gain a greater understanding of cultures that appear dissimilar from us, we often develop a greater capacity for compassion towards the people that comprise these cultures. In particular, my research here illuminates some of the ways in which living as a queer person can be challenging in a society where being queer is “on the fringe,” and where queer and trans\* bodies have, historically and still in some parts of our society, been punished for being non-normative (Grace & Wells, 2007; Janoff, 2005; Loutzenheiser, 2010; Sumara, 2007; Taylor & Peter, 2011). Using the field texts exhibited in this project, this research further elucidates some of the experiences that I and others have had that otherwise might have been “shrouded in silence.” This is salient for my thesis because it illustrates why theorizing a queer genealogy is necessary, why queer lineaging through the artistic practices of songwriting and singing are valuable, and how documenting queer lived experience in song helps me and other queer people like me to account for ourselves and feel at home.

Finally, autoethnographers often include a variety of ways to document and analyze experience. For instance, Chang (2008) asserts that in order to write an autoethnography, autoethnographers “collect field data by means of participation, self-observation, interview, and document review; verify data by triangulating sources and contents; analyze and interpret data to decipher the cultural meanings of events, behaviors, and thoughts” (p. 5). Further, in attempting to clarify what he means by “data” Chang replaces the term with “field texts,” which he borrows

from Clandinin and Connelly (2000) to describe the “multiple data collection activities” (p. 5) that researchers engage in when using autoethnographic methods. Therefore, the multiple data collection activities I engaged in to compose the autoethnographic field texts in this thesis include a collection of journal entries, stories and poems about experiences I have had, storied excerpts from others, conversational material, portions of lyrics written by other songwriters, and my own song lyrics.

I have composed songs based on interviews I conducted with various queer people, and other songs about my lived experience and experiences with queer people whose paths I have crossed. I have performed these songs at queer youth camps, in public schools, at folk music festivals, Pride festivals and various other LGBTQ events, women’s and feminist events, private homes, queer weddings, queer youth conferences, arts and music conferences, and in countless live music venues. The experience of performing songs in this wide range of settings has provided me a rich and varied exploration into queer subcultures, my life, and the queer lives of other people. It has also illuminated for me the value of composing and singing queer songs for myself and for those who engage with my songs in that songs connect me to the social world and vice versa. Employing an autoethnographic approach is methodologically appropriate for this project because I write about and perform my experiences, and I am interested in the ways in which social and cultural relations can be articulated and understood by analyzing one’s personal narratives whether in song, poem or storied format. Through this research, I have investigated my artistic processes and experiences critically and, furthermore, it has allowed me to interact with those who listen to my music, and my experiences of songwriting and performance in the context of queer and musical subcultures on a more informed and analytical level. Like

songwriting and singing, autoethnography reveals the “interconnectivity of self and others” (Chang, 2008, p. 15).

### **“Technical Problems” With the Show: Limitations of Arts-Based Research and Autoethnography**

Conducting arts-based and autoethnographic research has its limits. One of the criticisms of arts-based research is that it is “sometimes characterized as ambiguous because of the emotive qualities evident in the questions asked at the outset, which are expressed as sensorial, emotional, and/or intellectual processes of coming to know through the inquiry” (Sinner et al., 2006, p. 1238). Arts-based research, then, requires that the audience do some work at interpreting the art and the research based on their own perspectives. This is certainly an expectation that artists have of their audience: art need not answer every question and provide a clear path to a singular answer. Art often requires that audience members engage with it and come to their own conclusions (and further questions) based on their own positionalities and perspectives. As Sinner et al. (2006) claim, “openness is a cornerstone of strong arts-based research” (p. 1238).

Regarding autoethnography, this kind of qualitative research has been questioned on its limits as the researcher is both the author of the data and the analyst of that data. While an autoethnographic researcher is, as Robert Merton (1988) describes, “the ultimate participant in a dual participant-observer role” (as cited in Anderson, 2006, p. 379), this is not without its flaws. When a researcher is researching a group of which they are a part, this does not “imply a panoptical or nonproblematic positionality” (Anderson, 2006. p. 380). Being able to maintain a level of reflexivity where the researcher is keenly aware, as Davies (1999) claims of “their necessary connections to the research situation and hence their effects upon it” (cited in

Anderson, 2006, p. 382) can pose a challenge when one is researching oneself and one's artistic practices within a given subculture. Indeed, the autoethnographic researcher has "more of a stake in the beliefs, values, and actions of other setting members" (p. 383). The researcher is not, then, able to entirely "get outside" of the research and its goals, and be objective. They must, however, be transparent in their thoughts and experiences as they relate to the research questions they are working with, and more specifically, if they experience shifts in opinions, values, and thoughts throughout the research process (p. 384). One of the ways I mitigated this challenge was to pay attention to the places where unexpected ideas emerged in my thinking, and to be as transparent as possible in my writing as I analyzed the songs and related them to the narratives I presented. I reminded myself of Gallagher's (2011) work on drama and youth, and her contention that that drama research presents "no particular stable conclusion" but rather, "the act of telling the story opens up interpretive and relational possibilities" (p. 54). I linked this notion to songwriting and narrative writing as practices which may also offer no stable conclusions or definitive answers to my research question. Instead, I remained open to other possibilities and unexpected ideas that surfaced during my thought process as I wrote about the songs and aspects of my experience as a musician, and I grappled with these possibilities and unexpected ideas in my writing. This need for transparency highlights the layered and often complex nature of conducting research on oneself and the culture(s) in which one is immersed.

Another issue with autoethnographic writing is that it can sometimes lead to what Geertz (1988) has referred to as "author-saturated texts" (cited in Anderson, 2008, p. 385), where the writing reads more like an exposure of the self that doesn't add anything to the research at hand. Behar (1996) claims that the writing "has to take us somewhere we couldn't otherwise go to" (cited in Anderson, 2008, p. 385). This speaks to the notion of what one might call "process



writing versus product writing” (C. Ruitenberg, personal communication, July 16, 2015). The former is often needed in order to write about as many ideas, feelings, memories, and experiences as possible as they pertain to the research project. However, with the goal of producing “a final product,” that is, a research paper, thesis, or dissertation, a good auto-ethnographer must comb through their “process writing” and make decisions about what details and stories are key to the research at hand and which ones simply needed to be written out to allow the researcher to see what was salient to the project, and what was not. Then, jettisoning those extraneous details and stories provides a clearer and cleaner autoethnographic text that is less centred on the self but highlights the culture being written about and the self *in relation to others*. In the case of my thesis, I wrote much more than I actually retained in this final document. Once I finished “process-writing”, I went through all of the narrative sections and selected only those parts that were relevant to my research questions and supported the overall themes of my thesis. For instance, I removed any details that clearly pointed towards certain individuals and details of my life that did not ultimately add anything to the narratives themselves and overall themes of this work. I did this by referring back to my research questions regularly, asking myself repeatedly whether what I was writing supported my inquiry.

Finally, there is the question of “truth.” Autoethnography was developed as a research method because, inspired by Jean-François Lyotard’s (1979/1984) argument for “small stories” (*petit récits*), researchers wanted to get away from the “master, universal narratives” (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 2) that were being produced by traditional research methods, and they began to realize that personal narratives as data “were complex, constitutive, meaningful phenomena that...helped people make sense of themselves” (p. 2). Harrison (2013) agrees with Ellis (2009) that autoethnography is “not an account of what really happened, but rather a compilation of the

moments, images, and stories to unearth the more epiphanic moments within the life lived” (p. 30). Writing helps me to compile the moments, images, and stories of my life, and through the process of writing, I excavate the feelings and thoughts that accompany certain experiences, both recent and past, which clarifies my understanding. Using an autoethnographic approach in my work allows me to interpret these moments, images, and stories and their significance and implications in the context of queer and musical subcultures. Rowe (2014) contends that, “autoethnographers treat their data analytically, critically and through interpretive lenses in order to unearth cultural meanings and translate the social significances of what is recorded, observed, told and remembered” (p. 52). Here, I am saying that autoethnography does not make traditional claims to truth by producing and analyzing traditional kinds of evidence. Rather, the field texts I work with in this project, that is, the stories, poems, conversations, anecdotes, and songs, are accounts of personal and social experience written through the lens of my experience in the world as a queer woman. Therefore, these “truths” come from the perspective of my body, mind, and lived experience—they are my truths and not necessarily anyone else’s truths. There are some songs I have included here where the story itself is invented, but the inspiration for these particular songs or portions thereof sprang from very real emotional truths that were happening inside of me. Like Leggo (2007), “I am seeking, not Truth with a capital T, but a truthful exchange with others” (p. 30). Certainly, for autoethnographers, as Ellis et al. (2011) claim, “validity means that a work seeks verisimilitude; it evokes in readers a feeling that the experience described is lifelike, believable, and possible, a feeling that what has been represented could be true” (p. 34). Stories told in autoethnographic writing, then, aim to evoke an emotional response in readers and a feeling of resonance with the text; and “truth” is found in that a story is

believable. I hope that my stories and songs “take the reader somewhere they otherwise could not go.”

## **Methods**

The following segment includes an overview of the methods I employed and discussions on the issues I grappled with—as both researcher and artist—in order in to carry out this project. I have included sections on researcher positionality; settings, design, and collection of “data,” or rather, field texts; ethics, consent, and confidentiality; and how I carried out my data analysis by interpreting the songs and analyzing a portion of a conversation that took place during a collaborative songwriting session with a trans\* youth. Further, this section explains how, in the next two chapters, I laid out, contextualized, and analyzed my field texts, that is, the song lyrics and conversations during songwriting.

### **Researcher positionality**

As I have previously stated, I am both the researcher of this project and an artist: I am researching my own artistic practices and cultural works. As a musician, “song—the interweaving of lyric and music—has been my primary mode of creative expression and public discourse” (Bakan, 2013, p. 15) for many years. I regularly reflect on my lived experiences, relationships, and surroundings, and am “committed to acts of creation, transformation, and resistance” (Irwin & Springgay, 2008, p. xxv) through songwriting and performing. I am committed to composing and performing songs which intervene in dominant narratives of gender and sexuality and challenge the heterosexual imperative (Butler, 1993, p. 2). I aim to call out to queer bodies, speak *to* queer experiences, and illuminate and account for queerness. One of the things I found most challenging about conducting this research and writing it up was that it was

difficult to “stand outside” of my work as an artist and understand it through a theoretical lens. Because I am, first and foremost, a singer-songwriter and secondarily a researcher, and have been writing and singing songs for many years before I came to examine more closely what function these acts have had on my life, I sometimes found it difficult to separate myself out from the processes with which I have been engaged for years and look at them through a more critical, theoretical lens. I had to pay attention to when I was “feeling like an artist” and “thinking like a researcher”. I had to teach myself how to ask questions such as “why did I write this particular lyric?” and “what is the function of this story?” when analyzing the songs and choosing which narratives to include and which to leave out. Weaving these selected stories and journal entries throughout this text also helped to illuminate some of the ways I was thinking about songwriting and singing as they have impacted my life, both from a theoretical and personal perspective.

Being a part of a queer subculture that must invent creative ways to re-think what family can mean and look like has inspired me to continue to think of ways in which various art forms and practices can challenge current hegemonic thinking and meanings, for instance the narrow definition of genealogy, and move towards more creative, inventive delineations of self, family, relationality, and ancestry. Living in a queer body has meant that I have to invent new narratives around my life in order to self-validate my queerness and carve out a place for my continued existence. My commitment to this project is thus born from my work as a queer musician and educator, and as a member in queer subculture, and from a desire to inquire into the ways in which queer artistic practice, specifically, queer songwriting and performance, can contribute to the documenting, archiving, and lineaging of queer lives.

This project is not intended to provide definitive answers on the social, personal, and

political outcomes of queer songwriting and performance, nor does it suggest that my songs speak to, about, and for *all* queer people, or that my performances represent *all* queer bodies. As a white, able-bodied queer/dyke/lesbian<sup>8</sup>, I do not have the lived experience of those who are racialized, trans\*, have disabilities, or live in the intersections of multiple marginalized identities. I am suggesting that my songs and performances represent *my* journey in thinking through the possibilities of the origins of my sexual and gender identity. That the musical renderings of these possibilities resonate with others continues to be a wondrous thing to me. I am claiming that composing and singing queer songs documents my lived existence and, in doing so, helps me to make sense of who I am and locates me in the world, bonding me to others and to the music that has influenced and guided me through my life as a queer person and artist.

#### **“Where,” “what,” and “how”: Settings, design, and collection of data**

This research took place on the traditional, ancestral, unceded, and occupied territories of three Coast Salish nations, that is, the Sk̓wxwú7mesh, Tsliel-wahtuth, and Xméthkwyiem nations in the Greater Vancouver Area, in the province of British Columbia, and the Tsuu T’ina and Nakoda territories of Cochrane, Alberta.

The next two chapters are framed in the following pattern: first, I begin with a narrative that tells of a particular time in my life and includes a salient experience that occurred during that time. Then, I include the lyrics of a song written about that particular experience. Here, I argue

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<sup>8</sup> In a final draft of my thesis, one of my supervisors added “cis-gender” to this string of labels and “trans\*” to the remaining half of the sentence on the next page (while carefully suggesting they were making assumptions and to amend as I saw fit). I removed the term “cis-gender.” I think this is an interesting conversation to have at some point but perhaps here I will only say that while I do not identify as “trans\*,” I also do not identify as “cis”, simply because I *don’t* identify as “trans\*.” It is my feeling that the words trans\* and cisgender also set up a binary, to which I do not ascribe, as in: if I am not “x”, therefore, I must be “y” (pardon the chromosomal-related pun). While I do not consider myself “trans\*”, it is not easy for me to say that I don’t grapple with, on a regular basis, what it means to live in the body that I do, and feel differently in and about my body depending on the circumstances in which I find myself, and the people or person with whom I am in relation in a given moment.

that these songs could also be referred to as autoethnographic, as they tell stories about my experiences within various subcultures and some of the people that comprise those cultures with whom I am connected. Finally, I discuss the importance of the songs as they relate to the research questions I have outlined for this project: How do the musical practices of songwriting and singing help one account for oneself? How does the composing and singing of queer folk songs help orient one's body towards other queer bodies, and in doing so, help one to "find their way"? How does the writing and singing of queer folk songs do the work of building an archive of queer kinship? And finally, how does an archive of queer kinship constitute and inventive queer genealogy?

The field research I collected for this project comprises a variety of texts: journal entries, stories, poems, song lyrics, and a conversational excerpt that occurred during a songwriting session with a trans\* youth named Chase McKee with whom I composed a song entitled, "fYreflies." When I am songwriting on my own, I use my cellphone to record new song ideas, to remember notes, chords, rhythms, and vocal melodies, and to track the progression of a song to its completion. Likewise, when I was co-composing "fYreflies" with Chase, I recorded portions of our songwriting sessions on my phone. I use an excerpt from one of the conversations during those sessions in my analysis of "fYreflies."

**No queers (or others) were harmed in the researching of this project: Ethics, consent, and confidentiality**

Because my data includes audio recordings of conversations that took place with a co-songwriter during the composing of "fYreflies," I had to attend to issues of ethics, consent, and confidentiality regarding this person in the write-up of this project. In order to be mindful of research ethics in this portion of my research, I identified three types of ethics: procedural,

situational, and relational. As explained by Guillemin and Gillam (2004), procedural ethics are the traditional research ethics outlined by institutional research ethics boards, and situational ethics are what they refer to as “ethically important moments: the difficult, often subtle, and usually unpredictable situations that arise in the practice of doing research” (p. 262). Ellis (2007) outlines a third ethical dimension, relational ethics, to address researchers’ personal connections to their research and to respect notions of voice, authority, and representation: “relational ethics recognizes and values mutual respect, dignity, and connectedness between researcher and researched, and between researchers and communities in which they live and work” (p. 4).

The song “fYreflies” consisted of a set of songwriting sessions that occurred at Camp fYrefly, a summer leadership retreat camp for queer-trans\* youth, and a final re-writing session, which took place in Vancouver. My co-songwriter Chase McKee and I wrote “fYreflies” and then performed it twice for the entire camp: once at the showcase event on the last evening of camp, and again the next day as part of the end-of-camp celebration. The song became a “public” artifact immediately after our performances in that a few camp members posted the song on Facebook. Later that summer, Chase and I made a professional recording of the song in the studio I work with. The point of recording it was so that Chase could have the experience of recording a song professionally in the studio, and the co-director of camp could add it to their website for promotional purposes.

I obtained ethics approval from UBC BREB in order to include material from the recorded conversations that took place during the songwriting sessions because those conversations happened between my co-songwriter and me and were, technically, private. Because performance of the song was posted on a social media site by several other campers and camp staff members who witnessed our performance, it was publicly available as material for

analysis. I have no concerns for my co-songwriter's safety as he is "out" as a trans\* person in familial and friendship circles. In taking care to adhere to situational ethics, I chose not to include portions of the conversations that were of a personal and confidential nature, even though they contributed to the composing of lyrics. Relational ethics were not an issue for this research as no information about the relationality between my co-writers and others, including his friends and family and members of the communities in which they live, was relevant to the "fYreflies" songwriting project.

### **Data Analysis: Interpreting the Songs and the Songwriting Conversations**

As the archivist "collects materials that were created in the context of everyday life and work" (Kumbier, 2014, p. 11), my process for composing songs also involves "collecting materials" in the form of quotidian anecdotes, phrases, vignettes, stories, ideas, and conversations that can be reworded and composed into songs. All of these "materials" are based on or refer to a relationship of some kind with another person or group of people. Certainly, all of my songs have sprung from some interaction (whether imagined or real) that I had with someone else. In this way, the songs have a relational quality to them: I could not have written them were it not for my connections to and interactions with others. For example, in the instance of the song "fYreflies," Chase and I "collected materials" through brainstorming, discussion, and interviews from which we then composed a song about Chase's experience of attending Camp fYrefly. We settled on a progression of three major chords that had a positive, upbeat rhythm in 4/4 time, which provided the framework for our song and guided our writing process. I chose to include one particular conversation between us that pointed nicely towards the themes of accounting for oneself in relation to others, queer kinship and family, and the notion of "home."



As I conducted my analysis, I thought about several of Elliot's (2000) exploratory questions, "What is the nature of this phenomenon?; What are its defining features?; Why does the phenomenon come about?; and, How does it unfold over time?" (cited in Elliot & Timulak, 2005, p. 149). In my analysis, "phenomenon" refers to the song itself (i.e., song-as-phenomenon), and regarding "fYreflies," it also refers to anything in the conversation that pointed to my research questions as they related to the content of the song, and our relationships with the camp and each other. I also used these questions to analyze the other songs I included in my research. In working with these questions, I organized and identified the deeper meanings in the lyrics and the contextualizing stories as relevant to my research questions.

## **Conclusion**

Theorizing and researching a queer genealogy troubles what counts as truth. In queering genealogy, I am staking a claim that traditional understandings and heterosexual definitions of genealogy can be disrupted as I build a case for the embodied, relational characteristics and kinship qualities of songwriting and singing. Songwriting and singing, along with autoethnographic and arts-based methods, also trouble what counts as truth: these methods are ways to tell stories and share information that disrupt traditional understandings of knowledge production and information sharing. As methods that contribute rich, layered, and valuable information about lived experience and social-cultural relationships, songs, performance, and the autoethnographic accounts I have included in this project are all forms of storytelling that are both arts-based and research-based.

In conducting and writing up this research, I had to remain sensitive to and aware of the nuances in and between the variety of narrative accounts in this project, whether in conversational, poetic, storied, or journaled form, while making ongoing connections between each of the narrative accounts and the overarching thrust of this project. As I wove each of the narrative accounts into the literature review and theoretical framework of this project, while attending to the linkages that connected context with conversation, story with theory, lived experience with literature, and so forth, I considered the ways in which research is necessarily fraught with ethical issues such as confidentiality and privacy, questions around personal bias and positionality, and queries around what counts as “truth.” In attempting to paint a robust and nuanced picture of my experience with songwriting and performance as it relates to archival practice, I included a variety of narrative accounts in this project. There are many ways to tell a story, and I am reminded here of Harrison’s (2014) doctoral research where he was interested in the artistic practice of painting and “the story it can tell” (p. 38). He claims, “what I am painting is truer to how I see and understand it than how it actually is in the world” (p. 38). I am interested in how songwriting and performance, and writing about each of these processes can tell stories about queer lives, creating linkages between bodies over time and space. I am interested in how braiding these processes together can reflect how I see and understand my own sexual and gender identity; how I understand my queerness in relation to songs, singing, and other queer bodies; and how embodied artistic practices and processes like songwriting and singing—mine and others’—are forms of queer musical lineaging that build a genealogy.

## **Chapter 4: “I Was Never Meant to Live in the Terrified Shadows”: Beginning to Live a Life in Song**

It matters how we arrive at the places we do. (Ahmed, 2006, p. 2)

Write your self. Your body must be heard. (Cixous, Cohen & Cohen, 1976, p. 880)

### **When I Was Born into Words and Music**

*I was in my 20s when*

*I was born into words and music.*

*With the help of words and melody*

*written from the hearts of others*

*who sang out to the world, naming themselves*

*women loving women, outsider women, disruptive women, women on the fringe,*

*and I—calling back to them in response—*

*wrote and sang myself into existence.*

*I moved through*

*an existence fraught with the dangers of being human*

*of being vulnerable, of remembering, of unlearning and learning and unlearning again,*

*of loving and feeling and beginning, and yearning.*

*And I listened to their songs, over and over, and then I*

*felt and wrote and sang along with them*

*pushing myself through the birth canal of my old life  
and out into the light  
of a different kind of life—  
a life where I could recognize myself in others  
and others in me.*

*And as for the music,  
I gathered up the words  
that were flooding out of me and  
put them down on paper  
moved them around  
tossed them about  
gently discarded some  
gratefully honoured others  
until they fell together  
into a lyrical dance with one another  
and then found their way back into my body—like inhaling  
into my mouth, voicebox, lungs, guts  
and then out again as I persisted—like exhaling,  
in writing and singing for my life.*

*And there is a thing that happens when a song is sung  
when that exact combination of language and melody*

*works itself under the skin*  
*enters the heart*  
*and makes a home there,*  
*when it travels through the bloodstream, the muscles, the organs, the bones*  
*when it winds its way into the dark corners and crevices filled with ache and longing*  
*when it inhabits the body, becomes part of the body's DNA*  
*because it speaks the body—*  
*it sings the body.*  
*And, when the song moves out beyond its home and into another's body*  
*and another's*  
*and another's*  
*producing threads between us,*  
*lifelines coursing through our veins,*  
*highways of arteries wandering through tissues—*  
*like a map of roads that traverse small towns and cities,*  
*or the lines that crisscross a connect-the-dots puzzle*  
*weaving our bodies together, then,*  
*we are connected*  
*in words and music.*  
*And as the songs are sung over and over*  
*they remind me that I am real—*  
*that I exist,*

*and they remind us that we are real—*

*that we exist, too.*

*And then everything becomes a little less of a riddle*

*and life becomes a little less of a mystery.*

*Because, together*

*we are touching, feeling, breathing, being—*

*bodies joined together by melodies and harmonies and words carefully selected*

*music to our ears,*

*music in our hearts*

*music of our souls.*

When I read Ahmed's (2006) statement, "it matters how we arrive at the places we do" (p. 2), it seemed a fitting title for this chapter for many reasons. Every story and song that I have included in this chapter has helped me to arrive at the place I am now, and describes my attempts at making sense of myself and my lived experiences and relationships with others and how I attempt to do this by turning my experiences into song. They also serve to illuminate how these practices allowed me to orient myself in the world and build an archive of queer kinship with other songwriters and with those who listen to my music and attend my performances. In each narrative, I oriented myself away from some people and circumstances and reoriented myself towards others. Some of these orientations were subtle, while others were propelled by forces that I could not ignore. As I built my repertoire of songs, I was building an archive that accounted for my life, and

in doing so, I was building a lifeline for survival for myself and for others who would hear my songs.

As I sat down to write these chapters, I wondered how much of my life to divulge. Which narratives are useful and which are extraneous? Do I tell the story in a linear fashion? How much can I trust my memory as I write down the events of my life that are pertinent to this project? In writing as a way of attempting to understand what comprises human experience, we are, in effect, creating lifelines; we are composing lineages for ourselves through the written (and in my case, the lyrical) word. Further, when we dare to share these stories, we open up life worlds for others to speak their own truths, to come alive to themselves. As Chambers, Hasebe-Ludt, Leggo and Sinner (2012) claim, “by writing about our experiences, often in vulnerable, confessional and personal ways, we are creating spaces for others to join us in the conversation about their vulnerable and personal stories” (p. xxvi). This is what I aim to achieve with my story writing and the layout of these next two chapters. As with my songwriting and performing—the sharing of my stories in song with others through music—the point is to expand the spaces opened up by the queer and lesbian singer-songwriters who came before me and told their own stories in song and invite in new voices to share their own stories. In this way, this sharing of stories creates a connection and kinship between singers, speakers, and listeners.

The autoethnographic writing included in this project, that is, the stories, journal segments, poems, and song lyrics, build an archive of queer storytelling that helps queer people like myself—as well as those who don’t identify as queer but who resist normative ways of thinking about sexuality and gender(s)—account for themselves and foster kinships with one another. As we engage in acts of storytelling, we ultimately construct an archive that tracks our lives and lived experiences. This archive fosters a kinship because it allows other queer people to account for and

make sense of themselves in relation to one another. A queer genealogy, then, is constructed when these archived stories, which come from our bodies, pass between bodies, penetrate the “skin of the social” (Ahmed, 2006, p. 9) and also penetrate our bodies, becoming a part of us. Indeed, we make sense of ourselves in relation to one another and to the stories of others, whether these stories are told through written, spoken, or lyrical word. As such, the autoethnographic writing in this chapter is written so that the reader and I may gain a “cultural understanding of the self that is intimately connected to others in the society” (Chang, 2008, p. 9). More specifically, it is meant to elucidate the origin of the songs, that is, to tell each song’s story and situate each song within the overall archive of social experiences that I draw upon in order to compose the music I do. The writing introduces the songs (much like I would at a performance, except in greater detail), explains the backdrop to the songs and the people that inspired them, and analyzes the songs in relation to this project. The stories locate the songs along a story line, which in turn helps me (and the reader) to make sense of my location in a series of connections with people, knitting together the strands of a queer genealogy—one that is fashioned through the artistic practices of songwriting and singing.

As noted, I have included narratives throughout this thesis. The heart of this project, however, resides in these next two chapters, where my first task was to select six songs out of a repertoire of fifty-four recorded songs to include here. Choosing which songs to include required that I reflect deeply on which songs were the most pertinent to answering my research questions, and which would describe salient social experiences that portrayed an arc of my journey of coming into a queer and musical life. As well, I had to decide which songs would provide a clear sense of how I engaged in queer musical lineaging through songwriting and singing. Finally, I had to select which details were significant to this project, and which were not.



Referring back to Chang's (2008) use of the term "field texts" (p. 5) in the place of "data," I have laid out my field texts in the following systematic way. I arranged the songs in chronological order, based on the moment in my life when the experience narrated in the song occurred. Then, I wrote a story to precede the song, which contextualizes it by narrating the experience from which the song arose. Next, I included the lyrics of the song. Finally, I followed the lyrics with an interpretive analysis of the song material as it relates to my research questions and the overall themes of the thesis. I made sure to "begin at the beginning," or rather, around the time when the process of my *queer birth* began to emerge with a song entitled "Ex-Junkie Boyfriend." While composed in 2006, "Ex-Junkie Boyfriend" harkens back to the mid-1990s and a time in my life that marked the start of my journey in orienting myself towards a queer life, that is, a life where I chose women as life partners and began to realize that following the conventions of a normative existence was no longer something I could continue doing. From there, I included the other five songs that spoke to pertinent moments in my life—all of which were inspired by interactions with others as they related to my life as a queer woman and burgeoning singer-songwriter—that happened along a timeline from the mid-90's to 2014. To conduct the analysis of a song I composed called, "Rise Up," I also wrote about the work of Ferron as it related to my research questions. In the discussion of how Ferron's work and my own are related, I also included pertinent lyrics from some of her songs. When analyzing the final song I chose to include, titled "fYreflies," co-written with Chase McKee, I also incorporated a section of a conversation that took place during the composition of that song. This conversation is relevant because it spoke to some of the themes in my research questions.

Over the course of these next two chapters, it is clear that there were times I became what Heidegger referred to as "forgetful of Being" (cited in Chambers et al., 2012, p. xiv), and during

those moments in my life, songwriting and singing were the tools I used to re-orient myself and account for and locate myself in the world and to other people. Writing songs helped me to see the social and earthly connections I had established, that I wasn't alone, and that I had developed a kinship with other people. Indeed, when I am songwriting and singing, I feel connected to myself and to others. Songwriting and singing became the things that helped me *re-member* my being, or rather, these things helped me *come alive* to my being (appropriately, "Comin' Alive" was what I named my first full-length album). As Chambers et al. (2012) note, "stories present possibilities for understanding the complex, mysterious, even ineffable experiences that comprise human living" (p. xx). In these pages, I hope that it is clear that I have aspired to write songs that do just that. I have never aimed to write songs that just evaporated as soon as the last note was played. I endeavour to write music for people that cracks them open, breaks into their chests, and makes homes inside their hearts. Music—both listening to the work of queer and lesbian singer-songwriters, and then writing my own songs—engendered a sense of belonging in me and gave me a place to land. I aspire to "pay it forward"; I want my songs to make that possible for other people.

Finally, I found it interesting that writing these next two chapters was much like writing a collection of songs. When writing songs, I ask myself similar questions to the ones I asked when putting together these two chapters: What story do I want to tell? Which details are important and relatable, and which ones are extraneous? What style of writing works best to get my point across? What emotions do I wish to convey here? Does this writing actually get at what I am trying to say? The stories I share in the next few pages narrate the various lived experiences that inspired me to compose the songs I have included here. They are stories that tell of despair and confusion, hilarity

and joy, gratitude and clarity. These are stories of getting lost and being found and getting lost again. They are some of the stories and songs that helped me find my way and feel at home.

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### **Getting Lost: Ex-Junkie Boyfriend**

I've been trying to find a home for much of my life. I have moved countless times over the past 21 years and conjured up even more dreams about the different places I might finally decide to land and put down roots. It all started back in April of 1994 when the snow, brown and dirty from the sanding trucks, was melting in large, crusty piles along the sides of the streets, and the crocuses were peeking up from between blades of dead, yellow grasses flattened from the weight of the now-receding winter. The earthy smell of spring was in the air, and I was on the move. I was making the 4370-kilometre drive out to Vancouver to see if I could make a home there and start a new life.

To live in British Columbia was a dream I had had since I was a little kid. I don't know why exactly, except that I have felt pulled to the west coast ever since I can remember. Maybe it was the lure of the majestic mountains, the ancient cedar trees with their green, feathery branches and stringy bark, and the vast saltiness of the Pacific Ocean that called me. Maybe it was because my uncle, my father's brother, lived out in British Columbia at the time, in a chalet tucked into the side of a mountain in Whistler, and when I was a kid, I kind of idolized him and wanted to be like him. Maybe it was the desire to get as far away as I possibly could from the stifling, straight-laced, conservative small town of Cambridge near where I grew up. Maybe because it held the promise of leaving behind parts of my childhood I wanted to forget. Whatever the reason, I packed up my little, silver, bumper-stickered, Hyundai hatchback, said goodbye to my friends and family, pointed my heart westward and began driving.

Not long after I arrived in Vancouver, I fell head over heels in love with a guy. It was the kind of love that coursed through my veins and electrified my entire body. The kind where my senses were activated whenever he was around, and made me feel like I was floating two feet above the ground. I was so captivated by him that I was willing to be the kind of girlfriend I thought he wanted me to be: adventurous and cheerful, smart but not too smart, deferential and dependent—but not too dependent. He wanted to teach me things and, during those first few months with him, I wanted to learn. I wanted to take in everything and try as many new things as I possibly could.

The first time we did heroin, he and I stayed up all night in our little apartment, just east of Commercial Drive, and I discovered why it was so easy for people to get addicted to the stuff. He laid out the little pile of powder on one of our makeshift tables, which was a milk crate turned on its side that doubled as a storage shelf for CDs. Using a bank card, he arranged it in several small lines on a mirror. He demonstrated how to snort it through a rolled up five dollar bill. When he was done, he quickly wiped away the bit of white residue from underneath his nose and handed the rolled-up bill to me. I took the bill from his hand, stuck it up my nostril and sniffed slowly and deeply, following the tiny rail of white powder, as I watched it disappear up the blue paper cylinder. It burned my sinuses worse than those times I got chlorinated pool water up my nose as a kid. And then, moments later, a bitter taste dripped down the back of my throat. I put down the rolled-up bill, gave my nose a quick, hard sniff, swallowed the bitter taste, and sank back into our old, beige tweed loveseat, gazing up at the ceiling as a warm wave rushed through my body.

After only one line, I felt really, really relaxed, as though I was lying on a cloud. And, there were none of the weird mind games that I experienced with other drugs. Except for the utterly nauseating effects of having so much toxic stuff in my body which were always resolved

after I emptied the contents of my stomach into the nearest toilet bowl, heroin just made me feel all warm and fuzzy, even as I was throwing up. And, like most drugs, it made my anxieties and uncomfortable feelings evaporate. But most importantly, heroin took me completely out of my body, which was a relief because my body was a place I often didn't want to be. I didn't do it that much. My drug use was mostly confined to weekends, although I suppose I should admit that I enjoyed it an awful lot and was perhaps mildly addicted. I was often an uneasy and nervous person back then, so floating, disembodied on a cloud provided a welcome reprieve from how unsettled I usually felt in my body.

One particular time, we went over to his dealer's house. As we walked through the side door of the dilapidated, white clapboard house at Clarke and 12<sup>th</sup> Avenue in East Vancouver, I was acutely aware of leaving the warm, sunshiny, summer air for the dark, cold, moist air of the basement suite in which they lived. There, the light was dim because the shades were drawn all the way down, even though it was the middle of the day. A sharp, chemical odour, which I later learned was burning crack, hit my nostrils, as did the smell of lit cigarettes and marijuana. The apartment was in disarray, and the damp, stale air stuck to my skin like a lifeless layer of grime. I took a seat on a ripped, musty-smelling couch. The dealer's face was white and gaunt, as though she hadn't eaten much in a while. She smoked a cigarette while she began to weigh out our purchase, and I could almost see the life slowly draining out of her. As she and my boyfriend talked and laughed, I could see that her front teeth were stained yellow from nicotine, and one tooth was rotten and brown.

All of a sudden, I began to feel wholly exhausted. As I sat on the couch waiting for them to finish up their business, I fought to retain consciousness, feeling a weight trying to pull me under the surface of my being. A sense of dread came over me like a pair of invisible hands

closing around my throat and I was keenly aware that I didn't want to end up like this: living in a dirty, dank basement apartment selling drugs as a way to make rent and pay for groceries. Nor did I want to look like her: barely alive, like a shadow, or a ghost of herself. I became fearful that if I continued on the path I was on, this might surely become my story. I thought about my relationship with my boyfriend, and suddenly, I felt like a naïve child who had no control over herself, who had handed the reigns of her life over to someone else who was now at the helm. I felt the couch sagging beneath my body. I could no longer fight off the urge to fall asleep, so I folded over on my side and drifted into darkness.

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Two years later, I came to the final conclusion that doing drugs in the city and living in what would eventually become a dead-end relationship wasn't what I had in mind when I had set my sights on living in the mountains. When our weekend experimenting began to spill over into the workweek, I realized it was getting out of hand. I had to leave. I had to get away from the drugs and the relationship so that I could begin living the life I wanted to live. How exactly my life was going to look was yet to be determined but I knew I wasn't happy with him, I wasn't happy in Vancouver, and I wasn't happy with myself. I didn't really know what I wanted to do with my life; I just knew that it wasn't what I was currently doing.

The other truth that was weighing on me was the increasing curiosity I felt about what it might be like to be in an intimate relationship with a woman. While I hadn't yet discovered the music of Ferron, I had been listening to the music of queer singer-songwriters like Ani DiFranco and Indigo Girls for a few years now. The images of the stories they told took hold in my mind, and their women and queer-friendly lyrics had already moved into my body and sparked a resonance there. Because of their music, a queer yearning had already begun to breathe inside me,

and this queer yearning was something that I wanted to explore ever since I had first realized while at university that it was a possibility. But, I didn't want to navigate the parameters of my sexuality in Vancouver, under the watchful eyes of several friends and acquaintances who had also moved out to the west coast from Ontario: that felt like an impossibility. I had internalized a lot of homophobia and misogyny growing up, and I knew they had, too, and the fear of gossip and judgment from my social circle loomed over me like a threatening thundercloud. I was sure that exploring my curiosities while being tormented with worry about what they might be thinking of me would be too much to bear and I was not interested in feeling that raw and exposed. Besides, I didn't know the first thing about dating women: I didn't have any friends who were lesbians, nor did I have any family members with whom I felt comfortable talking about it.

So, I finally packed up the rusty, yellow, Chevy van I had bought with my boyfriend and left by myself for the Kootenays. My stomach was in knots about what it meant to be going off alone to a completely unfamiliar place, but I was in search of a new home and a new life. I was starting over. Again. Almost a decade later, I would return to Vancouver to begin my career in music, and a chance meeting with that ex-boyfriend on a street in Vancouver inspired me to think back to that time and write this song.

### **Ex-Junkie Boyfriend**

I was biking home from work today  
It was a beautiful, sunny Thursday  
And I pulled up at the stoplight  
And this guy in his SUV was looking at me

He had a shaved head and a smoke in his hand  
And our eyes met briefly, we both looked away and then  
The light turned green and my light went on  
And I realized who he was

### **Chorus**

He was my ex-junkie boyfriend

My ex-junkie boyfriend  
My ex-junkie boyfriend  
Sitting at the stoplight looking at me

Well, as he drove through the intersection  
I pedaled away and I shook my head in reflection  
About the time when I used to live with him in my early twenties  
Off Commercial Drive

I used to let him run my life  
We used to sit around and talk about drugs  
And we used to sit around and do drugs, too  
And I got so bored because it seemed like that's all the guy ever wanted to do

### **Chorus**

He was my boring junkie boyfriend  
My boring junkie boyfriend  
My boring junkie boyfriend  
I thought he was so cool back then

He dreamed of having a big, fancy grow-op  
And I just wanted for all of it to stop  
I was looking for a little more than getting high with some guy that I  
Didn't even really like

I couldn't figure out why I cried every week  
And I couldn't figure out why I was chronically unhappy  
Then, one day I woke up out of my stupor  
And I felt like a real loser

### **Chorus**

I was his loser junkie girlfriend  
I was his loser junkie girlfriend  
I was his loser junkie girlfriend  
Living with my loser junkie boyfriend

### **Bridge**

I used to dream of meeting myself a cute woman  
So I packed up my van, got out of town away from him  
I got some tattoos and I cut my hair short  
And I swore I'd never live like that anymore

### **Chorus**

My ex-junkie boyfriend  
My ex-junkie boyfriend



My ex-junkie boyfriend  
I thought he was so cool back then, yeah

My ex-junkie boyfriend  
My ex-junkie boyfriend  
My ex-junkie boyfriend  
I didn't know it, but he was so good for me  
Back then

“Ex-Junkie Boyfriend” is a song about getting lost but wanting to be found. It is a flippant response to what had been a difficult experience in extracting myself both from the relationship and the drug consumption I was engaged in. This song revisits a demanding situation and makes light of it. Had I written the song right after he and I had split, it would have been an entirely different song. With distance and time, I was able to stand back, reflect on my choices during those two years, and use humour to tell the story of a challenging time in my life. “Ex-Junkie Boyfriend” also speaks to my beginning desires and curiosities towards queer living, and what it might mean to reorient my body towards women in intimate ways. Ahmed (2006) says, “to be orientated is also to be turned toward certain objects, those that helps us to find our way” (p. 1). Certainly, in this relationship, and in the beginning of the song, I was oriented towards my boyfriend, and to a lesser extent, a lifestyle that wasn't very healthy. However, orienting towards him and our drug-use was one of the experiences that eventually put me on the path of beginning to reorient myself towards women and a healthier lifestyle. “Ex-Junkie Boyfriend” accounts for a turning point in my life where I begin to “find my way.” It is a song that accounts for a time when I began to awaken to new possibilities, specifically the possibilities of loving women and living the life I was longing to live.

Ahmed (2006) claims, “even in a strange or unfamiliar environment, we might find our way, given our familiarity with social form, with how the social is arranged” (p. 7). Along with

the social messages I was exposed to while growing up about how girls and women should behave in relation to boys and men, I had internalized how to orient myself towards men through my relationship with my father and the boys and adult men in my life. Growing up as a female-bodied person in a world that was organized around the needs of boys and men was both familiar (I learned my place very quickly), and strange (I knew, on a deep level, that I was an outsider). And, while I was wholly invested in experimenting with drugs and my boyfriend did not coerce me in any way, I tacitly knew that being the enthusiastic, compliant girlfriend who was willing to be “taught” was the thing that made me a “good girlfriend.” That knowledge had already been imprinted in the cells of my body through my previous relationships with boys and the men in my life, and the unconscious soaking up of social and cultural messages about how girls and women should and shouldn’t behave. Ahmed (2006) speaks to this: “the naturalization of heterosexuality as a line that directs bodies depends on the construction of women’s bodies as being ‘made’ for men, such that women’s sexuality is seen as directed toward men” (p. 71). I was taught, in living in a culture where (heterosexual) women are expected to cater to the needs of (heterosexual) men, that my body was made to fulfil the desires of men, and that I must direct myself towards them. To a lesser extent, it was also a desire of mine to be the antithesis of the person I had been taught to be in my family: doing heroin was a way that I saw I could “rebel” against my middle-class, “good-girl” upbringing.

This song speaks to a time when I began to realize that it was possible to reorient my body away from men. It recalls the first memorable time in my adult life of “getting lost,” and that being in a relationship with a man where I neglected my own health, both physically and spiritually, was perhaps the greatest marker of the beginning of a slow journey towards my queer self. Ahmed (2006) acknowledges that “‘getting lost’ still takes us somewhere; and being lost is

a way of inhabiting space by registering what is not familiar: being lost can in its turn become a familiar feeling” (p. 7). I experienced being “lost” in this relationship as a tension between the unfamiliar and the familiar. The intensity of our experimentation was unfamiliar and it steered me away from myself and put distance between my desires and me. In this way, I felt “lost.” Yet, being lost was also familiar: I was obedient, easy-going and “good,” and not in control of who I wanted to be and what I wanted to do. At the same time, I sensed that doing drugs and being in this relationship weren’t part of the life I had envisioned. Being “lost” felt like I was in “a stupor” from which I needed to wake up.

And I just wanted for all of it to stop  
I was looking for a little more than getting high with some guy that I  
Didn’t even really like

I couldn’t figure out why I cried every week  
And I couldn’t figure out why I was chronically unhappy  
Then, one day I woke up out of my stupor  
And I felt like a real loser

Being “lost” during that time forced me to re-evaluate my life. It helped me begin to reorient myself, not only back toward myself and away from this particular man in the song, but also towards the bodies of other women. Being lost forced me to move toward “becoming found” and “Ex-Junkie Boyfriend” documents this journey.

By the bridge in the song, I reveal that I longed to be oriented toward a different kind of body, that is, a woman’s body: “I used to dream of meeting myself a cute woman.” I then relay the steps it took me to orient myself away from a heterosexual life to a life oriented towards women: “I packed up my van, got out of town away from him. I got some tattoos, and I cut my hair short and I swore I’d never live like that anymore.” At the time, I felt that getting “some tattoos” and cutting “my hair short” would help mark me as a lesbian and as I turned towards

women at this point in my life, I hoped that my tattoos and short hair might be a sign to other lesbians that I was “one of them.” Certainly, these were stereotypical markers of lesbianism but they were also a way that I rebelled: to me, having long hair and tattoo-free skin meant that I was going along with the expected conventions of what a well-behaved, straight woman should look like. It also meant unwanted attention from heterosexual men. As one of my lesbian friends, who cut her hair short while she was still in the closet, claimed, “it was a way to say ‘fuck-you’ to society, even when I didn’t have the words to tell everyone I was gay.” It is true that I hoped that these (stereotypical) markers of tattoos and short hair would signal my queerness to other lesbians, who in turn, might begin to orient towards me. Written years after that relationship had ended, “Ex-Junkie Boyfriend” is a queer account of my burgeoning lesbianism and tells the story of how I began to *re-member* myself, that is, how I began to put myself back together. It tells the story of how I began to exit an unhealthy, heterosexual relationship, reorient myself from being with a man I “didn’t even really like,” to how I fantasized about the possibility of turning towards a queer relationship with “a cute woman.”

Ahmed (2006) contends,

a lifeline thrown to us is what gives us the capacity to get out of an impossible world or an unlivable life...we don’t know what happens when we reach such a line and let ourselves live by holding on. If we are pulled out, we don’t know where the force of the pull might take us. We don’t know what it means to follow the gift of the unexpected line that gives us the chance for a new direction and even a chance to live again. (p.17)

When I was in that relationship, I was living an “unlivable life” in the “impossible world.” The music of Ani DiFranco and Indigo Girls, and their feminist and queer-aligned lyrics, was a lifeline for me that gave me hope for a better life, and a promise that having queer feelings was something not to be ashamed of. I didn’t know it at the time, but writing and singing songs would become an extension of the lifeline that the songs of Ani DiFranco and Indigo Girls were

for me. I would discover that songwriting and singing would become “homing devices” (Ahmed, 2006, p. 9) that would help me find my way by pulling me out of the “unlivable” and giving me the chance for a new direction and a chance to live again.

### **Accounting for Myself: Co-op Girlz**

When I moved to the Kootenays, I discovered a picturesque little town called Nelson, BC, just 45 minutes northeast of Castlegar, which was where I lived at the time. Nelson seemed to have a more diverse population than Castlegar, consisting of an interesting mix of hippies, loggers, ski-bums, artists, musicians, health-conscious folks, pulp-mill workers, independent business owners, and environmental activists. There was a distinct fragrance that seemed to hang in the air over Nelson that was a combination of patchouli, amber resin, ginger, garlic, and weed. On my first day there, I discovered the Kootenay Co-op, a health food co-operative that was located on Baker Street, one of Nelson’s main streets. I love the smell of health food stores in general and this one was no exception: the earthy odour of fresh vegetables and fruits in the produce section, the aroma of (organic, fair trade, locally roasted!) coffee beans, and then the flowery, fruity, spicy scents of soap, soy candles, and incense in the body care section greeted me as I walked inside.

What was even more intriguing about the Co-op was that there appeared to be a large contingent of “alternative-looking” women employed there. I saw them in the produce department, behind the deli counter, in the vitamins and supplements section, and at the till. Suddenly, my budding “gaydar” was in overdrive. They were all over the place—the store was crawling with hippie-esque, “granola” lesbians! From then on, I felt vulnerable every time I walked through the sliding glass doors of the Co-op. Having no experience dating women, I

often felt awkward in the store because I wasn't quite sure how to behave around them, much less go about the business of getting my groceries with some measure of composure. It was almost as if everyone's eyes were on me, watching my every move, especially the queer women and lesbians. I felt raw and exposed, I was worried that they could see through me, as though they had some kind of supernatural "lesbian vision" that penetrated my heart and my thoughts, that revealed I was curious about them.

I tried frantically to summon the courage to inhabit my body and not feel like the desperate newbie who just wanted to be friends with all the cool kids. With a pounding heart, I grabbed a shopping basket, extract the crumpled grocery list from my pocket, and smooth it out between my fingers, pretending to concentrate on the words written there. Grocery and produce carts squeaked down the aisles while people chatted in the produce section and placed orders at the deli. Bells rang in short bursts as cash registers opened and closed, and paper bags rustled with incoming grocery items. There was some form of "world music" playing over the speakers, and a wave of thoughts would flood my mind as I shopped. Now that I was beginning to accept that I was one of them, I had so many questions: How does it work? Is it like dating men? What exactly do lesbians do on dates? Do I ask her out or does she ask me out? What if I don't know how to kiss or be intimate with a woman? What if I do it wrong? What if I'm not "lesbian enough" because I've been with men? What if they reject me?

As I began to traverse the unfamiliar ground of this new territory and navigate the accompanying insecurities surrounding this whole dating-women-thing, I realized my experience of frequenting the Co-op to get my groceries would make the perfect topic for a comical, self-deprecating song about the oft-intimidating and precarious prospect of seeking an intimate relationship with another person. Although it was 2003 when I wrote this song, the story begins

back in 1996, when I first arrived in the Kootenays after having left Vancouver and the relationship with my ex-junkie boyfriend.

### **Co-op Girlz**

I came out to the mountains, the big city lights were behind me  
It was just me and my old wounded heart driving down the highway to freedom  
And when I first pulled into Nelson, I couldn't believe my eyes  
There were all these hippies and little kids and freaks hanging around

And the heartbeat of this old town is a strip called Baker Street  
And my stomach was empty so I started looking around to find something to eat  
But I didn't have much money, a little loose change in my pocket  
When suddenly I found myself in front of the Kootenay Co-op Health Food Store

So I walked in through those automatic, sliding glass doors  
Yeah, they opened for me like I was someone real important  
And suddenly I was in a dream-like haze and my mouth feel open wide  
Well, forget my empty stomach 'cuz my heart was pounding for

### **Chorus**

Co-op girlz, co-op girlz, co-op girlz, co-op girlz  
Some of the cutest women in Nelson  
Were co-op girlz

“Where do I start?” I said to myself  
I mean, there were produce girls and deli girls and even herbal-supplement-consultant girls  
So, I kept it fairly simple and I picked up something from the deli  
And I was feeling a little more hopeful about myself when the Deli-Goddess smiled at me

So I marched up to the woman at the till and she asked me for my number  
And even though I thought she was a little forward, I said “357-0126”  
And I was thinking I had myself a date but then she looked at me and said,  
“Honey, you must be new in town 'cuz I'm talking 'bout your membership number.”

Oh god, I'm such an idiot, I said, “I don't have a number”  
Then, I looked down at my shoes and I hung my head in shame  
And just when I thought my luck was done, and I was planning my escape  
She asked if I wanted to be a member, and I looked up into her big brown eyes and said,

### **Chorus**

Co-op girl, co-op girl oh yes I want to be a member  
Co-op girl, co-op girl, just tell me where to sign

Co-op girl, co-op girl oh yes I want to be a member  
Co-op girl, co-op girl, just tell me where to sign

So once I became a member, the benefits started rolling in  
There were these monthly co-op meetings, a sure fire place to get a date  
So I got all dressed up and ready for my night out on the town  
And I showed up at the meeting.

And I pulled a chair up beside the girl with the Big Brown Eyes  
And there was the Deli-Goddess sitting on her other side  
You see when I moved out to the Kootenays, I had myself a plan  
To ditch the straight life and become a dyke.

So half-way through the agenda I took a long deep breath  
It was during the topic of “yearly dividends” when I turned to Big Brown Eyes  
And I asked her for her number because I thought I’d try again but she  
Put her arm around the Deli-Goddess and then they said to me,

### **Chorus**

Desperate girl, desperate girl, better luck at the AGM  
Desperate girl, desperate girl, this ain’t the Fluid Lounge  
Desperate girl, desperate girl, better luck at the AGM  
Desperate girl, desperate girl, this ain’t the Fluid Lounge

So, I found out that they’ve got this thing called the 10 percent-monthly-membership-discount  
It’s kind of like customer appreciation  
Well, I’d like to find out what that’s *really* all about  
I mean, I could always use a little more appreciation in my life

### **Chorus**

Co-op girlz, co-op girlz, I need some appreciation  
Co-op girlz, co-op girlz, just punch in 6411  
Co-op girlz, co-op girlz, I need some appreciation  
Co-op girlz, co-op girlz, just punch in 6411

Co-op girlz, co-op girlz, co-op girlz, co-op girlz  
Some of the cutest women in Nelson  
Were co-op girlz

“Co-op Girlz” is an invented account of going to buy groceries one day and attempting  
(and failing miserably!) to secure a date with one of the women there. Or, as I often introduce it  
when I perform, “Co-op Girlz” is a song about “trying to pick up chicks at the local health food



store.” I used humour as a theme in this song to buoy myself through the difficulty of navigating the lesbian landscape (Ahmed, 2006, p. 20) and my queer desire for women. I invented “Co-op Girlz” as a way to “manifest a history that is *present* in memory and structures of feeling and *absent* from the archival record” (Kumbier, 2013, p. 52). While the story itself is invented, it is a song that is based on real feelings and thoughts I experienced about the possibility of loving another woman: I turned those feelings and thoughts into the narrative of “Co-op Girlz.” By this time, I had already been listening to the music of Ani DiFranco and Indigo Girls for a number of years, and their music had instilled in me a belief that queer love was possible for me. Their songs gave me hope that one day, I would be able to be comfortable enough in my skin to express my queer desire for another woman. In this way, their music was a compass that pointed me in a “queer direction,” that is, their songs began to orient me towards women. Now, it was up to me to make sense of my feelings and to take a risk in asking another woman out.

“Co-op Girlz” does not lead the listener or me to a “queer destination,” and by that I mean, I didn’t “get the girl” in the end. The lyrics, however, provided me (and perhaps, those who listen to the song) with a bit of a map as they lay out the story of the emotional and behavioural terrain that I stumbled through in the song that represents my attempt (in real time) to make sense of my desire for other women and the risks I would have to take in order to pursue dating a woman. “Co-op Girlz” speaks to the challenges of feeling comfortable with my queer desires, and it tells the story of how I began to move into the world of lesbianism. It is an attempt to make sense of and account for my queer desires. Writing “Co-op Girlz” provided a “way in” to my desire by telling the story of my first attempt at asking a woman out on a date. In a way, this song mapped out the experience of shifting my desire away from men and towards women.

“To turn away from ‘the other sex’ is also to leave the straight line” (Ahmed, 2006, p. 71). “Co-op Girlz” evidences that I turned away from men, and left my straight life behind. Like Ahmed, “I left the ‘world’ of heterosexuality, and became a lesbian, even though this meant staying in a heterosexual world. For me, this line was a lifeline, and yet it also meant leaving the well trodden paths” (p. 19) of a life with men. Through a series of circumstances and experiences I had had in my life thus far, it had become obvious to me that I was at the point where I needed to make the decision to orient myself towards women. Perhaps this is a contentious thing to say, given the debates over the years about whether sexuality is “a choice.” However, in many ways, turning towards women felt like it was, for me, based on a series of experiences and decisions. I must be clear with the reader here that I am in no way suggesting that one definitively chooses to be a lesbian. The decision to orient myself towards women simply felt like a lifeline to a more fulfilled and honest life. Making my life with women was ultimately my truth, and being in relationship with a woman was how I felt most content. But it wasn’t as easy to say, in terms of being queer, that I was, to quote Lady Gaga (2011), “born this way.” Rather, I lived for nearly half of my life as a heterosexual woman before making a queer departure (Ahmed, 2006, p. 75) in the third decade of my life.

Yet, even as I made this decision, I still carried an immense amount of shame with me, and a tenacious dose of internalized homophobia. This is evident both implicitly and explicitly in “Co-op Girlz.” Overall, the song is a humorous, self-deprecating tale of unrequited love in the aisles a health food store. It is also the story of my difficulty in navigating my feelings around what it would take for me to become intimately involved with a woman. Explicitly, I poke fun at myself for being too eager, for giving the cashier my phone number rather than my co-op membership number:

And even though I thought she was a little forward, I said “357-0126”  
And I was thinking I had myself a date but then she looked at me and said,  
“Honey, you must be new in town ‘cuz I’m talking ‘bout your membership number.

Immediately, I am mortified that I read her question as an invitation to go on a date,

Oh god, I’m such an idiot, I said, “I don’t have a number”  
Then, I looked down at my shoes and I hung my head in shame.

This part of the song humorously depicts how shame played out inside of me during this interaction with the woman at the till. I was well aware that the “‘direction’ of my desire toward ‘the same sex’ [was] an ‘aberration’” (Ahmed, 2006, p. 70) in the larger society. In the moment described above in the song, my awkwardness about wanting to be accepting as “one of them,” my enthusiasm to begin dating women, and the self-confidence imbued in me after the Deli Goddess smiled at me, had caused me to misinterpret what I thought was a cue that the woman at the till was interested in me. That shame hooked into a belief that she didn’t want to date me because I wasn’t lesbian enough—because of a host of reasons I had checked off in my head based on things I had heard people say about what lesbians did and didn’t do, how they looked, what they wore and so on. Further, I told myself that *because* I wasn’t lesbian enough, I was incapable of reading the subtle cues (or lack thereof) of lesbian desire.

Shame, “an intense and painful sensation that is bound up with how the self feels about itself, a self-feeling that is felt by and on the body” (Ahmed, 2004, p. 103), enveloped me while I shopped at the Kootenay Co-op. I feared that people could see through me and felt embarrassed that I not only was attracted to women, but also felt like a “newbie” to the whole experience of dating women, and an outsider because I had no community of young lesbian friends with whom I could talk about these things. Ahmed claims, “shame feels like an exposure—another sees what I

have done that is bad and hence shameful—but it also involves an attempt to hide, a hiding that requires the subject to turn away from the other and towards itself” (p. 103). Heterosexual narratives and messages still lay embedded in my flesh and fuelled my shame. What I had “done that was bad” in the eyes of larger society was to feel desire for women, while simultaneously, I also felt shame for being an inexperienced lesbian. Indeed, Ahmed declares, “the difficulty of moving beyond shame is a sign of the power of the normative, and the role of loving others in enforcing social ideas” (p. 107). “Co-op Girlz” was a song that made light of my shame and also helped me to come to terms with my desire by presenting it in an amusing way. It accounted for my lesbian desire and provided a map with which I could attempt to “find my way” through this desire.

Because this song comes from my body, resides in my body, and helps me to inhabit my queer body as I sing it, “Co-op Girlz” is part of my queer genealogy. As a song that expresses my queer desires, that is, my desire for women, “Co-op Girlz” bends the straight line: it is a queer song that provided me a lifeline when I deviated from the straight line. It helped me (and now, my listeners) to inhabit spaces we are otherwise not meant to. Singing queer songs help me inhabit my own body because when I sing queer songs, I sing the queerness *in* my body, and then, I sing it *out* of my body and into the world, so that others like me can join me in the singing. I aim to write songs that are recognizable so that they help others to orient themselves in the world. In this way, queer songs mitigate the shame of inhabiting a non-normative body. As a lesbian, I have had to, like Ahmed (2006),

reinhabit space, in part by learning how to be more cautious and by seeing what before was in the background, as bodies and things gathering in specific ways. For me, this has felt like inhabiting a new body, as it puts some things ‘out of reach’ that I didn’t even notice when they were in reach. (p. 102)

In becoming lesbian, I gave up the privilege of being able to blend in seamlessly in the heterosexual world as a straight woman. I gave up the privilege of not having to be cautious about how and when I expressed care and desire for my lover. Ahmed continues by making the point, “it takes time and work to inhabit a lesbian body; the act of tending toward other women has to be repeated, often in the face of hostility and discrimination” (p. 102). Singing songs like “Co-op Girlz” over and over, in public spaces and in my own home, has assisted me in inhabiting a new space, and a new body: a queer/dyke/lesbian body. While the narrative of “Co-op Girlz” is a fictional account, it speaks to actual feelings I experienced in my body. It is a story of lesbianism archived in song, and the song and its story came from my body.

### **Finding My Way on Stage: The Only Dyke at the Open Mic**

Over the next few years, I wrote a handful more songs and, in 2006, after I had moved back to Vancouver to pursue a career in music, I recorded and released my first full-length album. The reason for titling the album “Comin’ Alive” was two-fold: it literally felt like writing the songs for this album had helped me to begin to “come alive” to myself, and it felt as though I was being born again in the process of making this album. I remember being in the studio recording the songs and often feeling close to tears as different musicians came in to record tracks for the songs on their instruments. It is difficult to put into words how it felt to have these professional players collaborate with *me* on *songs about my life!* I recall having to excuse myself a couple of times from the studio to wipe the tears from my eyes, take a deep breath, and compose myself. When I finally picked up my order of 1000 CDs from the processing plant, I felt a wave of pride wash through me as I held one of the CDs in my hands for the first time. All of those years of songwriting and the hours upon hours of time spent in the studio were wrapped up in this thin,

plastic package in my hands. It wasn't just a CD: my entire life had been written and sung into the mirror-like surface of each CD, in every box I was loading into my friend's car. The music contained within documented the stories of my life, songs that told the world who I was, or at least who I felt like I was at the time I wrote a given song. The songs were evidence of my existence; an account of my life as a living, breathing, feeling person; the stories of a woman who was trying to figure out who she was in the world. The songs chronicled in music, a life lived that was complicated and messy—a life that was full of sorrow, joy, rage, curiosity, and hope. And now, all of these stories that had for so long lived inside my body had been liberated. Now, they were tangible, audible testimonies of my life. It was an accomplishment that I had been dreaming of both consciously and unconsciously for years. As my friend and I drove away from the processing plant, I pulled myself out of the open window and sat on the ledge of the car door. As I whooped and hollered into the wind, my body felt as if it might burst wide open.

As my career began to materialize, I began to play more shows, and more people became familiar with my music. Meanwhile, writing songs continued to help me to make sense of my life and allowed me to name and vocalize my thoughts and feelings about my experiences. I thought a lot about my experiences in and reactions to society from my perspective as a woman, and in particular, a queer woman, and these reflections often turned into songs. While I often continued to feel out of place or anxious about performing, especially to audiences that I perceived to be “straight” and conservative, writing, singing, and performing songs helped to ease those feelings. Singing my songs about being queer helped me to be present in my body and to come to feel “ok” about what it meant to be queer. When I sang in these spaces, spaces that were more often than not “straight rooms,” I made a point to keep in mind the queer and lesbian singer-songwriters before me who had already done this work. I oriented myself towards them in my mind as I sang with the

understanding and knowing in my body that I was carrying on a tradition of songwriting and singing that was built upon a foundation laid by those women. Keeping these folk-singing foremothers in mind helped me to feel “grounded” and “at home” as I sang in front of audiences because I knew that my work was a continuation of their work, that my work was built on theirs, and that I was passing down stories of queer lived experience to others, as my folk-singing foremothers had done to me through their own songs. I knew that my work as a songwriter was connected to their work in this way, and hopefully, it provided a sense of connection for those who were listening.

Playing music became a way of helping me to feel comfortable in my queer skin. I had learned a long time ago that it picked up my spirits when I felt disoriented, sorrowful, or lost. When I wrote this next song, it was at a time when I still needed to feel comfortable naming my identities as a queer woman and as a musician, out loud, to myself and others. By this time, using humour in my songwriting as a way to deal with my insecurities and anxiety about being a queer woman had become cemented in my process as a story-telling tool that I used to invite audiences to be “on my side,” that is, to invite them into the story I was singing. I hope that the humour in my songs helps to counteract some of the negative stereotypes about feminist lesbians and women that abound in society: if I was a feminist lesbian with a sense of humour, people might pay more attention to what I was singing about, rather than dismissing me as an angry feminist (which, indeed I am, some of the time!). Writing with humour also helps me to feel human in my queer body, and certainly, back then, it alleviated the sting of difference and un-belonging and made feeling out of place comical. Years later, I am able to revel, now and then, in the feelings of un-belonging—I am much more at ease with the difference in me in some situations. However, as the reader is by now aware, that was not always the case. There is a tension here in talking about

notions of “difference” and “being out of place.” It is a significant challenge here not to talk in terms of “inclusivity,” “acceptance,” and “difference” with regards to normative sexual and gender identities, as if there is something that queers need to be “included in,” or a group that queers need to be “accepted by.” This tension speaks to the challenges of binary thinking and the “us versus them” mentality that pervades much of our language. I find it very difficult to speak in ways that don’t reify the notion that queers are different from non-queers and that we must somehow be welcomed into non-queer society in order to feel accepted and whole. And yet, this is still my desire: to live in a world that treats everyone with respect and equality, and to write music that helps others feel comfortable in their bodies.

Finally, this song was also written at a time when I needed to keep challenging myself by performing on as many different stages as I could, in order to get over my performance anxiety. So, one evening in early 2007, after a difficult day, I felt pulled to push myself by going out to play a few songs in a public space. I headed out the door of my apartment with my guitar in hand, for an open mic event at the Cottage Bistro on Main Street in Vancouver. I figured that a local open mic event was as good a place as any to lighten my mood and work on my performance chops. This next song is an example of what happened that night. There isn’t really an introduction to this song or a story to share that inspired the writing of this song: the song itself is the story.

### **The Only Dyke at the Open Mic**

I was feeling blue the other night so I  
Walked down the street to the neighbourhood open mic  
Thinking if I played a couple of songs  
It just might make me feel all right

I walked up to the bar and put down my guitar  
And ordered myself a tea because I couldn’t afford a beer  
And then I sat down and took a look around the place



And surveyed all the faces in there

There were some college kids slamming back a couple of pitchers  
And a group of teachers in V-neck sweaters, planning their next strike  
And on the mic was a Kurt Cobain look-alike in converse shoes  
Singing some grunge-love, suicide blues

There were some old boys sitting at the bar, giving me the stare  
They were checking out my hair  
And I thought "Oh my god, what am I doing here?"  
Right now, I could really use that beer."

### **Chorus**

I'm the only dyke at the open mic  
My throat's feeling a little tight and it's getting hot in here  
I'm the only dyke at the open mic  
I wish I was on that flight tonight, Joni, get me outta here

When Kurt sang his final note  
He left the stage to smoke cigarettes and drink him self depressed  
And the hostess asked if I'd like to play a couple of tunes  
Well, I guess I didn't have much to lose  
So, I jumped up on stage but I bumped into the mic stand  
And it crashed landed to the floor  
And the hostess ran up to help me out as I was  
Fighting off my second round of self-doubt

### **Chorus**

I'm the only dyke at the open mic  
And the mic's down on the floor and I'm already looking for the door  
I'm the only dyke at the open mic  
I'm just trying to look cool but I'm feeling a bit foolish

Then, it took me what seemed like forever to tune my guitar  
And I could hear the old boys at the bar snickering through the darkness  
And I'm still thinking, "Do I really have to go through with this?"

Then the microphone started feeding back on me  
And the sound guy freaked out  
And I felt like I was in one of those classic movie scenes  
You know or like the time when Ellen DeGeneres finally came out

And the old boys at the bar had their backs to me no  
And Kurt Cobain was getting drunk and loud

And the teachers were rowdy and ready to call union meeting, and me?  
I was still contemplating leaving

Then, I heard someone say, “I hope this chick doesn’t stick around,  
Cuz I’ve had enough for one day.”  
And then I ripped into my first song and I blew them all away

### **Chorus**

I’m the only dyke at the open mic  
I’m working the crowd and I’m making them laugh out loud  
I’m the only dyke at the open mic  
Well, what do you know? I was winning ‘em over

So, I finished my tunes to a round of whistling and clapping  
And I was packing up my guitar case  
When one of the old boys from the bar came over  
With a really sheepish look on his face

And I’m thinking, “OK, what’s this guy going to say to me?  
I better get ready.”  
But he slapped me on the shoulder and  
He said with a grin, “I loved your songs, man  
I wish I was a lesbian.”

### **Chorus**

I’m the only dyke at the open mic  
Strumming my guitar in this dingy little bar, yeah  
I’m the only dyke at the open mic  
Belting out songs about women, feeling good when I’m singing

Yeah, I’m the only dyke at the open  
Strumming my guitar in this dingy little bar  
I’m the only dyke at the open mic  
Some nights I gotta push myself a little farther

In writing this song, I contribute to an archive of queer relations. It is a song about being queer, and it is also a song about the embodied experience of singing about being queer in front of an audience. Like many of my songs, “The Only Dyke at the Open Mic” is an example of what Sharon Marcus refers to as “auto-archiving” (Kumbier, 2013, p. 14). Auto-archiving involves archiving the stories of the self; it refers to the act of “writing personal memoirs to document

queer histories” (Kumbier, 2013, p. 14). “The Only Dyke at the Open Mic” is an excerpt, a personal memoir from my queer history. Further, like other songs that speak about my sexual orientation, it is a *countersong*, that is, one that challenges a dominant narrative about who is present and performs music in public spaces. Given the over-saturation of heterosexual-identified artists and heterosexual-themed songs, it is unexpected that a “dyke” might indeed also *sing a song about being a dyke singing songs* in public spaces. It is also a countersong about how a queer artist might be received by a straight audience: that night, my songs were well-received in the “straight room” that was the Cottage Bistro on Main Street in Vancouver, and certainly by “one of the old boys from the bar” who approached me after my set, revealing that he wished he “was a lesbian.”

The lyrical choice of using the word “dyke” is two-fold. First, it rhymes with “mic,” and while it is a word that historically was meant to be a disparaging, homophobic reference to “lesbian,” many lesbians have reclaimed the word “dyke” as an identity marker or label. Saying I am the “only woman at the open mic” wouldn’t work: it wasn’t only the fact that I was a woman on stage that made me feel out of place. Likewise, calling myself “the only lesbian at the open mic” did have the same ring or impact. “Dyke” takes back that which was intended to be used against lesbians and gives it new life and new power. For me, the monosyllabic “dyke” is direct and rebellious; it orients me away from the “good, well-behaved, straight woman,” and even the “good, well-behaved lesbian” who uses the “proper” label of “lesbian,” and reorients me towards an identity that is counter-normative. Indeed, some might view the use of the word “dyke” in this song as “flaunting my sexuality,” which is precisely the point. I return here to the work of Mason (2001) who talks about the “social and political hush that has historically enveloped the subject of same-sex sexuality” (p. 24), and Ruitenbergh (2007) who makes the case that male heterosexuality

is often flaunted (and indeed, heterosexual women also often flaunt their sexuality). Using the word “dyke” flaunts my sexuality in a different way: it simultaneously “others” me while reclaiming that othering in a humorous way in the singing of the refrain, “I was the only dyke at the open mic.”

Indeed, “The Only Dyke at the Open Mic” is a reclamation of self, sexuality and historically pejorative terms like “dyke,” all the while poking fun at my feelings of un-belonging. However, it simultaneously illuminates the fact that I was not alone in that room while I was on stage. There were people in the audience who responded to my songs and with whom I connected that night as I “made them laugh out loud,” and heard them respond to my set with “whistling” and “clapping.” I connected with these people in the audience through the performance of my songs. Even at the end of the song, when “one of the old boys from the bar” approached me and “clapped me on the shoulder and said, ‘I loved your songs, man, I wish I was a lesbian’,” he and I bonded in that brief exchange. To my surprise (and delight!), he had enjoyed my songs and told me so. Further, as hysterical as his statement was, he drew a connection between the two of us in that moment. He recognized me as someone he “wished” he could be: a lesbian. It seemed like an attempt on his part to orient himself towards me, that he recognized in me a kindred spirit as one who also loves women. I also realized in that moment with him that I had made an assumption about him and his drinking companions up at the bar: that they did not approve of me, or my songs. That moment I shared with him has stayed with me until this day because it unravelled several things for me that night. It dispelled my fear about not being taken seriously as a musician or a woman; it confronted my worry about being a lesbian in a “straight space,” and it challenged my assumptions about the kinds of stories and music people might be interested in hearing, even in spaces like the Cottage Bistro, and finally, what other people might be thinking about me as I

played my songs. It was a moment of shared enlightenment between us that was initiated by him, and certainly, his statement, “I wish I was a lesbian” was the inspiration for writing the song. Had he not made that hilarious comment to me, I am quite sure I would not have written the song. Indeed, the whole evening culminated in the moment he said that to me, and I intentionally set the song up that way. This exemplifies how “The Only Dyke at the Open Mic” came into being, and even how I was drawn into relation with this “old boy from the bar”: his exchange with me inspired the writing of the song, and he also recognized me as a lesbian and said, jokingly, that he wanted to be one. It also exemplifies the kinship that happens during a performance and how people are drawn together through song and performance, even outside the “boundaries” of what it means to be queer. Finally, I must also confess here that another reason I composed this song was simply because I suspected the story might appeal to a “straight crowd”. In this sense, “The Only Dyke at the Open Mic” invites less queer people into the story by retelling the tale of a presumably straight man who took a liking to a dyke musician (or at least, her songwriting abilities and burgeoning performance “chops”) with a guitar. It “flirts” with the stereotype that heterosexual men fantasize about lesbians, and functions to break down the division between “straight” and “queer”, in particular, the division that insists that heterosexual men and lesbians have nothing in common and couldn’t possibly be interested in one another.

The Cottage Bistro was not a “site of lesbian public culture” or a “lesbian location” (Cvetkovich, 2003, p. 3), and it certainly was not a space where queers went to perform songs about being queer, which is what I did that night at the open mic. As a space that is not advertised as a “queer space,” one can assume that it is a “straight room,” a room frequented mainly by heterosexual people. It had the potential to be a homophobic space, a place where I could be relatively unsafe, given what I was singing about. Who knows what could happen when I sing

queer songs in straight spaces? There is always a possibility that someone in the room might take issue with my lyrics. However, I wanted to sing about my life and make room for the unsung stories of queer lives, and I aimed to do this, not only in queer spaces but also in heterosexualized spaces. In this way, singing songs like “The Only Dyke at the Open Mic” in public, “unqueer” spaces takes “sexuality out of the bedroom and the intimacy of the couple and made it the focus of collective conversations” (Cvetkovich, 2003, p. 4). While “The Only Dyke at the Open Mic” wasn’t directly about sexuality per se, it made my sexual and “life” preference for women front and centre by naming myself as a dyke in the song.

“The Only Dyke at the Open Mic” is a song about a queer woman singing about being queer in a public place. In a way, like the song, “Ex-Junkie Boyfriend,” it tells the story of getting lost and becoming found; it is about feeling disoriented and out of place in public and then getting reoriented on a stage through the singing of songs. Ahmed (2006) contends, “bodies that experience being out of place might need to be orientated, to find a place where they feel comfortable and safe in the world” (p. 158). This song not only accomplishes the task of helping me to orient myself as I sing it, it is *about* orienting myself towards my own self by performing songs on a stage, by taking up space that is normally taken up by non-queer bodies. Ahmed posits, “the queer body becomes... a ‘failed orientation’: the queer body does not extend into such space, as that space extends the form of the heterosexual couple” (p. 92). Indeed, “The Only Dyke at the Open Mic” is about how my “body now extends less easily into space” (Ahmed, 2006, p. 102) as a lesbian, and how I must continue to, as the last chorus claims, “push myself a little bit farther” into that straight space by singing about my orientation in public places. It is the performing of songs that helps me to find my way and rebuild my confidence: I sing about how I “blew them all away” by “working the crowd,” “making them laugh out loud” and “winning ‘em over” with my songs.

In the end, it is a song of triumph: it is a song about an embodied experience of performing, and how a lesbian body can come to feel at home on stage while playing her songs, even in a straight room.

## **Chapter 5: “Running with the Herd”: Singing with Queer and Trans\* Bodies**

Life, after all, is full of turning points. (Ahmed, 2006, p. 15)

### **Orienting Towards Other Queer Bodies: Rise Up**

One summer, I was invited to perform at the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival, just outside of Hart, Michigan as part of a songwriters series they were producing for the upcoming festival. I was ecstatic! I couldn’t believe that I was invited to perform at North America’s longest running women’s music festival; this was a dream come true.

I was also petrified. It was my first major festival outside of playing Vancouver Dyke March and Festival for two years at that point. Many questions flooded my mind: what songs should I sing? What should I wear? What if I’m so nervous that I make mistakes while performing? What if I’m not a good enough musician? And again the question: what if I’m not lesbian enough? I checked out the performer line-up to see with whom I would be sharing the bill. One of my songwriting heroes, Ferron, was also going to be performing that summer. This was unbelievable—I was going to be performing at the same festival as Ferron! As the summer drew closer, I invited a friend to join me, booked my flight, and arranged for a performer pick-up from the airport.

My sound check was scheduled at the Acoustic Stage for 11 a.m. in the morning, the same day as my performance. It was a typical Midwest morning: sunny, hot, and muggy. The stage was facing southeast, and the sun was beating down on me as I ran through a couple of songs from my set list and conversed with the woman in the sound booth about my monitor levels. I was in the middle of singing one of my songs when I noticed this figure walking down the path directly



ahead of me towards the stage. The sun was in my eyes so I couldn't quite tell who it was until they were halfway to the stage. As their face came into focus, I thought to myself, "Oh dear god, it's Ferron!" I just kept singing, trying to remain calm. Ferron walked around to the back of the stage and disappeared out of my line of vision.

Once I was done my sound check, I packed up my guitar and exited the stage. Backstage, my friend grabbed me and said, "Ferron's over there, and she was asking who you are. You should go and talk to her!" She was asking about *me*? Suddenly, I could feel my heart thumping against my ribs. "Ok," I said, "I'll go and talk with her." I saw her sitting on a bench, and I went over and sat beside her and introduced myself. I probably told her I was a big fan of hers or something to that effect; I don't really remember. What I do remember is that she told me she liked the songs I was singing. Then, she told me she was holding a five-day women's writing retreat after the festival on a property in Michigan where she lived with her partner. She said that at the end of the writing retreat, each woman who participated in the retreat was invited to perform something they wrote during the retreat at a public, outdoor concert she was having on her land. She gave me her card with her name, phone number, and the name of the retreat centre that was located on her land, and asked me if I would like to come to the retreat and sing some of my songs at the outdoor concert, along with her and another well-known lesbian performer. Ferron was asking *me* to come to her retreat and sing at her concert!

I can't remember all the things that went through my mind, but I do remember that the first voice I heard in my head was "you're not good enough to do this!" Instead of being filled with possibility for what it might mean to spend a week writing under Ferron's tutelage, my brain was flooded with all of the obstacles I thought were in my way. Most of these obstacles were just excuses that added up to the belief that I truly wasn't worthy to hang out with Ferron and a bunch

of queer women writers, musicians, and performers. I said, “I can’t” and began to ramble off a bunch of reasons as to why I couldn’t take up her offer. I had caved in on myself. She didn’t try to persuade me otherwise, but said simply, “Ok, well, maybe next time.”

And with that, it was over. I watched the opportunity fly past me in a blink of an eye. Part of me wanted to take it back, and a voice in my head timidly murmured, “but wait a second...,” while another part of me, the louder, more fear voice in my head told me it was too late, the moment was gone. And it was. Gone. Ferron turned away from me and had moved on to another conversation with someone else while I was sat there beside her, frozen, as humiliation began to pool inside my body. Suddenly, I was acutely aware of a feeling of sitting in a large, enclosed tank that was filling up with water inch by inch, covering my body. I felt as though I was about to drown. I managed to get up, grab my guitar, and leave with my friend.

When I got home after the festival, I spent a lot of time thinking about what had transpired between Ferron and me that day at the festival, and what had happened inside me when she asked me to attend her writing retreat. As I thought about it, I felt the weight of my feelings, and so I wrote about it. It was during this process of thinking, feeling, and writing that I realized something important. It wasn’t just that I had said “no” to Ferron; I had said “no” to myself. I had turned down an opportunity to spend time with one of my favourite singer-songwriters because *I was afraid*. This realization hit me like a swift kick in the gut; I had betrayed myself and let my fear make a decision for me. It was a sobering realization. Even after all those years of learning how to recognize and own my fears by listening to Ferron’s music, and then even as I was expanding into my own life as a queer singer-songwriter and performer, I still succumbed to my terror of not being a good enough musician *and* a good enough lesbian.

Reminding myself that writing and singing music could pull me out of feelings of depression, loneliness, and shame, I knew I needed to write a song about this experience: writing a song about it could help me work through some of the feelings I was experiencing. As I sat down with my guitar, I pulled out the business card she had given me at the festival and forced myself to dial the phone number on it, hoping that if I spoke with her, I could redeem myself and perhaps get another invitation. I didn't really know what I was going to say, I just wanted some kind of second chance. No one answered, and I left a message. She never returned my call, and I didn't have the guts to follow up.

### **Rise Up**

It's been a rough morning  
In fact, it's been a rough week  
The sky is blue  
But I don't hear you calling me

And I missed this train  
I didn't even hear it pull into the station  
And now I'm waiting all alone  
In my shame

You asked me over to sing a few  
And I said, "Can't, I've got a job to do."  
And I felt that familiar nothingness coming through

### **Chorus**

What is it that keeps me frozen even when it's warm outside?  
What is it that keeps me down when I'm supposed to fly?  
I'm supposed to fly.

See there's old blood coursing through me  
From the lives that have gone before me  
And it slows me down now and then

And despair built my bones  
And fear forged my flesh  
But there's a warrior spirit somewhere in here, too

**Chorus**

And the truth is that life has always terrified me  
But dying empty always terrified me more  
It terrifies me more.

And I know how to make friends  
With other people  
But I haven't yet learned how to make friends  
With myself

So I play music  
To fill that space in me  
And I know the Earth has  
Birthed a place for me

**Chorus**

And it's the heart that we've got to  
Pay mind to  
Or we may find ourselves  
Where we ain't supposed to be  
And sometimes I can't see  
Beyond my own eyes  
But I know inside that I'm going to rise up  
I'm gonna rise up  
I'm gonna rise up

In writing "Rise Up," I oriented myself towards Ferron and her music. As an out, butch-identified lesbian, Ferron wrote songs that had an immense impact on me and had travelled with me in my life for many years before the encounter I had with her that day at Michfest. In her song, "I Never was to Africa," she sings,

If you're ever sitting where the rushes grow  
Or you catch a red rose bloom  
Or if you're ever standing where a raging river flows  
And you feel yourself a lonesome tune  
That's right, it's me again  
Right by your side—Ferron, 1984, *Shadows on a Dime*

I often felt that, as one of my “mothers-in-melody,” Ferron and her songs were “right by [my] side” as I was coming into my identity as a lesbian/queer woman. Over the years, her songs had been the companions that taught me how to make sense of some of my feelings and had helped me orient myself towards a queer sexuality and the bodies of other queer and lesbian women. Her songs were with me during the time I was coming out; they were with me as I began reflecting on some difficult childhood experiences; they were with me as I first fell in love with a woman; and they were with me when I experienced the end of that relationship—and they are with me today. Ferron’s songs taught me how to put a name to my pain and loneliness, my fear and despair, my joy and gratitude, and to my desire for a life with a woman. Her songs have always invited me to “be still, to remember to breathe, to hear and see and know with the heart” (Leggo, 2005, p. 185), and writing “Rise Up” asked me to do the same. “Rise Up” called me to contemplate and pay attention to what happened with Ferron at Michfest, a site of lesbian counterculture, to unravel how I felt about that experience and to move me through the pain of despair and self-betrayal so that, in the end, I could “rise up.” It was also my hope that this song would do the same for those who would hear it, that it would accompany those who also needed to be still and pay attention in their lives, so that they might “see and know with their hearts,” so that they might “rise up” out of a difficult experience of their own. Because “Rise Up” was about an encounter I had had with Ferron, I wrote the lyrics and the music in a style similar to hers, as a way to acknowledge the impact of that encounter with her at Michfest, and the importance of her music in my life. Even though “Rise Up” is not a “queer song” per se, in writing it in a style similar to Ferron’s, I oriented myself towards her and her way of songwriting, as she and her songs had mentored me into a queer life and a songwriter’s life. “Rise Up” is part confessional

and part homage to Ferron and her work, and in paying homage to her work in the writing of this song, I necessarily orient myself towards her and her music.

Leggo (2005) asserts, “human beings are really human be(com)ings constituted in the play of language” (p. 177). He claims here that we become and make ourselves, over and over, through our interactions, that is, our “play,” with language. Bresler (2008) says something similar in regards to how engaging with music asks us to “become”: “involvement in music as creators, performers, and listeners requires that we engage in the evanescent aspects of world, cultivating sensibilities that apply to ways of doing as well as ways of *becoming*” (p. 226). I am made and re-made as I write and sing songs about “evanescent aspects of the world” (such as that brief experience with Ferron); engaging in the language play of writing and singing songs helps me to account for myself and make sense of who I am; songwriting and singing help me to become and know myself. In writing “Rise Up,” I used musical and lyrical language to uncover and account for some of the ways I let my fears dictate my life choices, and certainly how I let fear dictate my response to Ferron’s invitation. In writing and singing “Rise Up,” I was able to articulate some new understandings about myself; I came to know myself a little more. “Rise Up” is an example of how I wrote in order to account for some of the reasons why I was unable to say “yes” to the opportunity she presented to me backstage that day; it helped me to make sense of how and why I responded to her the way I did in that moment. In this way, “Rise Up” helped me to find my way through my fear and shame of what it meant to believe that I wasn’t “musician enough” or “lesbian enough” to take up Ferron’s invitation.

Not only did listening to Ferron’s work teach me how to find my way by accounting for and articulating my feelings about that experience at MichFest, but listening to her music also taught me *how to write* “Rise Up.” By listening to her lyrics, how she played her guitar and used

her voice, I learned how to write a song in a similar style to how she wrote, and played and sang. In this way, her songs mentored me through the process of writing this song. I patterned many of the lyrics of “Rise Up” after themes in her songs, but I will only speak to a couple of examples here. In “Girl on a Road,” Ferron sings about a yearning inside of her that is connected to paying attention to her own dreams and desires, in her life pursuits, and in love. She refers to it as “the calling of my soul” as she sings,

I did my best to follow  
The calling of my soul  
It’s like that first guitar played  
At the center is a hole, at the center is a longing  
That I cannot understand as a girl on a road.

Here, Ferron is making a connection between music and the calling of her soul. There is something that she cannot name—a longing for something—that resides inside of her and feels similar to her urge to play music. The hole at the centre of her guitar mirrors the longing inside of her. Like Ferron, I too have a longing inside of me that I soothe by writing and singing songs. I feel as though the “calling of my soul” is to write and sing songs: this is the thing that fills me up. The following lyric in “Rise Up” is modeled after this idea:

So I play music  
To fill that space in me  
And I know the earth has birthed a place  
For me.

Here, I am likening the “space in me” to the “hole” and the “longing” that Ferron references in her song. Like the hole, that longing inside of Ferron, I too, have a “space inside me” that I attempt to fill with music. As I use music to fill this space inside of me, it has also helped me to make sense of and account for myself.

Another lyric from “Girl on a Road” that inspired a lyric in “Rise Up” was

My mama was a waitress  
My daddy a truck driver.  
The thing that kept their power from them,  
Slowed me down a while” (Ferron, 1994).

This line seems to imply that there are things beyond our control that influence our lives. We often inherit legacies from our families, who in turn, inherit legacies from their own families, which impact how we live our lives. It seems to me that the barriers we face in our lives can be connected to the barriers and life circumstances faced by those who raise us. That lyric of Ferron’s inspired me to write this line in “Rise Up”:

See, there’s old blood coursing through me  
From the lives that have gone before me  
And it slows me down now and then

Making music professionally was, in many ways, a scary venture for me, one that challenged me to my core, as was acknowledging my queerness. As “it takes time and work to inhabit a lesbian body” (Ahmed, 2006, p. 102), I had to figure out how I was going to overcome both the ongoing challenge of being comfortable in my (queer) skin without having any queer familial role models to look to for support and guidance; and how to navigate the persistent terror I felt about making music as “a way of life,” rather than doing music as “a hobby,” as my family members did. In composing the lyric above, I acknowledge the impact Ferron’s own parents’ struggle had on her, and allude to my own ongoing struggles in accepting my sexual orientation and my dream of leading a professional, musical life. Here, I am reminded of Halberstam’s (2005) notion of “queer time” and how my birth into queerness and a musical life, was hindered by the “old blood coursing through me,” blood that wasn’t queer or infused with a desire to build



and carry out a musical life. As I reflect on this now, it is clear that I somehow instinctively knew I could facilitate my own becoming, and continually birth myself anew and become myself—both musically and queerly—by listening to the songs of other queer and lesbian women, and also by writing my own songs.

The emotion “fear” is a recurring theme in Ferron’s songs. In “Sunken City,” she sings about the desire of wanting to become someone more than who one is in that moment, and the fear provoked by that desire:

To be what you are, is one thing  
To be what you want, now that’s something else  
You say you’re finally afraid of something  
I’m holding your hand, I’m kind of scared myself (Ferron, 1990).

Her song accompanied me, and her words “I’m holding your hand, I’m kind of scared myself” comforted me in knowing that I was not alone in my fear of wanting to “be what [I] want.” This lyric resonated with me and reassured me that she too, felt afraid. I was afraid of being a lesbian and afraid of being a person who wrote, sang, and performed songs professionally. I was afraid of living the life that I dreamed about, but I was also acutely aware that if I didn’t orient myself towards that life, that choosing not to follow my heart would have resulted in something far worse: an empty life. Ferron’s songs encouraged me to sit with and contemplate my fears, and then write and sing about them. In “Rise Up,” I wrote the lyric,

And the truth is that life has always terrified me,  
But dying empty always terrified me more,  
It terrifies me more.

I was terrified that day at MichFest when Ferron invited me to be a part of her writing retreat. Saying “yes” to her would have been a life-giving choice. For me, “dying empty” meant

dying after having lived my entire life in the shadow of my fears of becoming someone I had only ever dreamed of becoming, which was a person who listened to and followed her heart, one who made music professionally, and was able to have a loving relationship with another woman. Yet, in reflecting upon all of this, and in writing the song “Rise Up,” I had ultimately made a life-giving choice: to continue to pay attention; to use music as the thing that guided me; to write and sing music as a way to account for myself and reorient me in the world. Writing this song was a crossroads of sorts, and I chose to continue to turn and face myself through songwriting and singing. As Ahmed (2006) says, “life, after all, is full of turning points” (p. 15).

Finally, the “feel” and “sound,” that is, the fingerpicking style and chords, are sonically patterned after a style that Ferron uses in several of her songs. It illustrates how I oriented myself towards and paid homage to Ferron’s *body of work*. As I listened to her songs over and over and witnessed her perform throughout the years, I paid attention to the musicality of her songs: the kinds of lyrics she wrote, the delivery of her voice, the chord progressions she played, and the fingerpicking styles she utilized penetrated my body and became very familiar to me. This song represents a deliberate attempt to craft a song *in the same vein* as Ferron’s songwriting style. Here, I make the reference to the expression “in the same vein” deliberately: indeed Ferron’s songs were in my veins, alongside my own songs, intermingling and coursing through my musical blood. As Bresler (2008) notes, “sound has the power to bond” (p. 227), and because her songs were *in* me, I felt bonded to them (and to her) because of how they had accompanied and mentored me in my life. Each time I sing this song, I orient myself towards Ferron<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> An addendum to this story is that the following summer, I returned to Michfest and encountered Ferron again. This time, I was able to tell her about “Rise Up” and how I would love to attend one of her writing retreats in the future. She then invited me to a 5-day writing retreat she was holding immediately after the festival, which I attended. Later that year, I opened for Ferron at three

## **Building an Archive of Queer Relations: Captain Cupcake and the Cambie Hotel**

In the fall of 2009, I was on tour for my second album, “I’m Just Warming Up.” I began my tour on Vancouver Island, having booked a show at a trashy bar inside a place called the Cambie Hotel, in Nanaimo, BC. When I parked my rental car and went inside with a friend who was accompanying me on this leg of my tour, we looked at one another, feeling slightly unsettled. The cover charge was a grim five bucks at the door, which was collected by a large, well-muscled, and slightly mean-looking bouncer. Inside the bar (which was known as “The Cambie”), there was a stage at one end of the room, and rows of old wooden tables and chairs that had various names, messages, and heart-shaped declarations of love carved into the wood. The hotel offered “performer hospitality,” which my friend and I discovered consisted of a windowless room on the floor directly above the bar and the stage, complete with a couple of black-painted bunk beds dressed in thin, white, hospital-looking sheets and a couple of tired-looking, beige blankets. It looked like the kind of room where countless “boy bands” had slept, and the kind of bed in which I felt compelled to sleep in my clothes—with my shoes on. The bathroom provided us no towels and no toilet paper.

I felt more than out of place in this establishment, not because I wasn’t accustomed to frequenting watering holes much like this one when I was in the heyday of my (roaring!) twenties, but simply because I was here to sing my very *queer* songs in what felt like a decidedly *unqueer* place. As usual, when I was preparing to perform in these kinds of public spaces, the inevitable questions of who was going to be in the audience and how might they respond to my music flashed across my mind. I was on the bill with a band who called themselves “Suzie

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of her concerts: in Vancouver, Salt Spring Island, BC, and Pender Island, BC. I also attended another writing retreat she facilitated on Pender Island during that time.

Wedge and the Waves,” which, I would discover, much to my surprise and delight, was fronted by a trans\* woman!<sup>10</sup> Suzie Wedge’s music was a loud and punky combination of rock ‘n’ roll infused with surfer music, the kind with the loud tom-tom drums and electric guitar sound reminiscent of The Surfaris’ 1963 instrumental song, “Wipeout.” Knowing that another queer was performing that night offered me a measure of relief: with Suzie Wedge performing that night too, it had to be all right.

After Suzie did her sound check, I went up on stage to plug in my guitar and begin my set. The place had filled up by then. There were a few hippie-looking types, several businessmen sitting up at the bar in dress shirts and ties, some other guys dressed in flannel, dirty jeans and work boots, and even a few tables with what appeared to be lesbians. It was a really mixed crowd, but that didn’t seem to matter: The Cambie was the kind of neighbourhood pub where it seemed that everyone was just there to share a pitcher of beer (or several), listen to some local music, have a good time and unwind after work. It almost felt reminiscent of a scene out of the 1980s sitcom “Cheers,” the place “where everybody knows your name” (Portnoy & Hart Angelo, 1982).

Halfway through my set, I began to notice one man in particular. He was sitting directly centre stage, a few tables back, and he was having a really great time. He seemed particularly taken by my songs. As I belted out my lyrics, he was smiling, clapping along, and almost jumping out of his seat. As I watched him, I found myself wondering, “What is this guy all about?” I could just sense that he had an interesting tale to tell; it was beginning to be my experience that people didn’t just respond like that to my music without having a story of their

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<sup>10</sup> While “trans\*” does not fall under the label of “queer,” I include Suzie Wedge in this conversation because, as a non-normative and differently-gendered body, she queered the space that night by being present in the heterosexual space of The Cambie.

own to share that somehow resonated with the songs I was singing. The thing is, he looked like your average, run-of-the-mill guy; he was older than I was, probably in his late forties, with long hair and a receding hairline, and dressed as if he just walked out of the bush in old, faded Levi's and one of those light brown Carhartt's jackets overtop a plaid work shirt. I was curious to find out more about him.

Once I finished my set, I started packing up my gear to make room for Suzie's band to come on. I noticed that he approached my friend who was waiting offstage and began excitedly talking with her. After I exited the stage, I joined them, and it was then that I discovered why he was so excited about my performance. He told us that he had a fetish for donning "feminine" clothing and that sometimes he even wore select items from his womanly wardrobe to work. This might not seem that outrageous except for the fact that he made a living as a tugboat driver. The guys he worked with were ok with it, he said, they even called him "Captain Cupcake." He also told us that he got married in a wedding dress. I was amazed: I crossed paths with this quirky, unconventional man right here, at one of my gigs in a grungy tavern in downtown Nanaimo! My friend and I were inspired by his story. And, I knew it was a story that had to be documented and told: it was an unanticipated and pleasantly startling tale of quotidian queer life about which I felt compelled to sing. A cross-dressing tugboat driver? How could I not write a song about this?

### **Captain Cupcake and the Cambie Hotel**

Well, I pulled up outside the bar of the Cambie Hotel in Nanaimo  
There were meatheads mouthing off on the street, they were pissed up and fist-fighting.  
There were Harleys parked outside and a bumper-stickered, pick-up truck that read,  
"Ass, grass or gas: no-one rides for free."

And I thought to myself, "this could turn out to be one hell of a night.  
I better leave my car engine running and tie my shoes up real tight."

But this one guy inside the joint caught my eye,  
He was kind of skinny and scrubby-looking, he was laughing and clapping along in time.

And when I was done singing, he came up to me and I swear to you that it's true.  
He said, "I drive a tugboat for a living, I'm pulling all the big ships through.  
I work the Georgia Strait everyday but we're a pod of peas, me and you."  
And then he said and winked, "I'm not as straight as you might think."

**Chorus:**

"I'm a cross-dressing, tug-boating, roughneck from Nanaimo.  
I work the high seas in high heels, I'm a tough guy in disguise.  
Oh, they call me Captain Cupcake, I come from Vancouver Isle-o,  
And I hang out down at the Cambie Hotel."

I thought I misheard this guy so I said, "What did you just say?"  
Then, the trans-rock-surf-punk band plugged in and began to play.  
And my new friend checked out the lead singer of the band and elbowed me saying,  
"Man, I look better in a miniskirt than that guy does any day...."

"Anyway, Kate, you may be wondering to yourself just how does a guy like me  
Get a job driving a tugboat, when I'm kind of a 'dude-looks-like-a-lady'?  
Well, I grew up hauling payloads big and small, I'm as good as any man.  
I know these seas like the back of my manicured hand."

**Chorus**

"One night," he said, "I went down to the Cambie for a beer.  
I couldn't believe my eyes as I walked inside, oh, I was utterly hypnotized.  
See, there was this stunning waitress running the bar, she was dressed to the nines.  
She was mesmerizing, I mean, she could launch a thousands ships of mine anytime."

"Meanwhile, the boys from the boats sat up at the bar and they smoked and joked,  
And drank whiskey and poked fun at me and my femie garb.  
'You've got style Cupcake, but make no mistake,' they laughed,  
'She's way out of your league.  
You're an odd catch and you're no match for a classy broad like that.'"

So Cupcake sat alone with his beer in a booth in a dark corner of the room.  
And she'd work the floor of that run-down saloon, night after night  
Like it was some high-fashion runway.  
"Well, she's captivating and I'm capsizing here, head over my five-inch stilettos," he thought,  
"Oh, little does this little lady know, that she really floats my boat."

"Then one night, Kate, the boys were putting back the draught, they were plastered and making  
passes at her  
And everything I'd been holding inside me exploded, I finally snapped," he said

I stood up and told them off and then in the next breath, I confessed to her,  
“You’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen and I’ve been wondering  
Would you marry me?”

**Chorus**

“Then much to the boys’ surprise and well, I was certifiably tongue-tied,” he told me  
“When she threw her arms around me and said, ‘You know, the first time I laid my eyes on you  
honey,  
I knew you were a different kind of man from all the rest  
So if we can wear matching wedding dresses, then baby, I’ll say yes.’”

“Captain Cupcake and the Cambie Hotel” contributes to an archive of queer relations because it narrates and documents a queer encounter I had with another queer body. While much of the plotline of “Captain Cupcake and the Cambie Hotel” is “invented,” it is organized around an actual person and the key pieces of the story that he shared with my friend and I that night at The Cambie. Because stories about people like Captain Cupcake and others like him are largely absent from archival records, “Captain Cupcake and the Cambie Hotel” is a song that “exceed[s] the limits of the archive” (Kumbier, 2014, p. 52) in that it tells a different story in the form of a song—a song that moves beyond the boundaries of the traditional archive—and a queer story that might not otherwise have been told. I am reminded here of Cheryl Dunye’s (1996) claim, “sometimes you have to create your own history” (cited in Kumbier, 2014, p. 52). As queers, we have had to create our own histories in order to account for the erasure of our stories, to make up for our lack of queer genealogical inheritance, and to stake out a place in the world.

When I think about what it means to “stake out a place in the world,” I recall Gill Valentine’s notion of the “heterosexualisation of space” (cited in Ahmed, 2004, p. 148). The heterosexualisation of space refers to how streets and other public spaces are “naturalised by the repetition of different forms of heterosexual conduct (images on billboards, music played, displays of heterosexual intimacy and so on)” (p. 148). As a queer body living in a

heterosexualized space, I welcome queer interruptions like the experience of meeting Cupcake at the Cambie that evening. In writing “Cupcake” and singing the song in public spaces, I “make room for another story” (Cvetkovich, 2003, p. 23). “Cupcake” counters the overrepresentation of normatively storied songs, and intervenes in the heterosexualized space of music by telling a “queer story” in song. It is an example of a queer interruption in normative, quotidian life, and it tells two queer stories simultaneously. First, it narrates the story of a chance encounter I had with a cross-dressing tugboat driver in a bar in Nanaimo, and second, it gives an account of his experience in the world as such. Cupcake himself was a disruption, and the experience of meeting him was an unexpected disruption in what could have been any other gig at any other bar. Meeting Cupcake, and the experience of inhabiting that particular space with other LGBTQ bodies (my queer friend, Suzie Wedge, the lesbians in the audience) was a “queer occurrence” at the Cambie, a bar whose patronage typically presents as straight. Said another way, the Cambie is not a “queer bar,” rather, it is a “straight room,” and so, as non-normative bodies, we were queering its space simply by being present there. This song tells that story: it is auditory evidence to that queering. “Captain Cupcake and the Cambie Hotel” accounts for the fact that queer bodies exist, even in unexpected places like grungy beer joints in Nanaimo, British Columbia.

In being together with other queer bodies in the heterosexualized space of The Cambie, I experienced an unexpected “queer pleasure” which puts “bodies into contact that have been kept apart by the scripts of compulsory heterosexuality” (Ahmed, 2004, p. 165). I certainly felt more “at home” after having sung my songs and talking with another kindred spirit in the room in the form of Cupcake. Ahmed (2004) argues,

Queer pleasures are not just about the coming together of bodies in sexual intimacy. Queer bodies “gather” in spaces, through the pleasure of opening up to other bodies.



These queer gatherings involve forms of activism; ways of claiming back the street, as well as the spaces of clubs, bars, parks and homes (p. 165).

What an unanticipated, queer pleasure it was to encounter Cupcake, the lesbians in the audience, and Suzie Wedge that night. In orienting my self towards to the audience and specifically, towards the other queer bodies in the room by singing my songs, I was claiming back that space and “finding my way” in that room. Perhaps, my songs helped Cupcake to also “find his way,” which seemed plausible, given his enthusiastic response to my songs and the subsequent sharing of his story.

“Captain Cupcake and the Cambie Hotel” documents queer lived experience and adds to a queer auditory archive because it tells a tale of one man’s non-normative existence and describes an evening where queer bodies gathered in a straight, public place. One could argue that dressing in clothes that do not line up with one’s sex does not constitute queerness. However, Cupcake’s feeling compelled to share his story with my friend and me tells me he indeed felt some resonance with my music and the fact that I sang about my sexuality and gender orientation. My songs facilitated a queer relationality between us that night, and they clearly had an impact on him. I witnessed this as I sang, and I felt it as he spoke with me. It is my sense by observing Cupcake while I sang, that my songs created a space where, in relating to what I was singing about, he could feel a sense of recognition and belonging, and a kinship with me. Perhaps, in witnessing and hearing me sing my songs, Cupcake oriented his own body towards mine, as another non-normative body in that straight room. As part of an archive of queer relations, “Captain Cupcake and the Cambie Hotel” helps comprise a queer genealogy through song. Hopefully, it helps other queer bodies “find their way,” providing a sense of belonging for those who are similar to Cupcake, that is, who fall outside the realm of the normative. As Ahmed

(2006) claims, “queer orientations are those that put within reach bodies that have been made unreachable by the lines of conventional genealogy” (p. 107). Non-normative bodies find one another by turning towards and acknowledging each other’s queerness in queer ways, for instance after a performance of queer songs.

### **Bringing it all Together: Chosen Family, Found Family and the Writing of “fYreflies”**

You get the gift of contributing to the future, with everything you have had in your past.  
—Ferron, interview with Gillian Kendall, May 1, 2014

In the summer of 2014, I was the artist-in-residence for Camp fYrefly, a summer leadership retreat for LGBTQ youth and their allies in Calgary, Alberta. It was my third summer in a row working at Camp fYrefly. Being a part of this camp was a special experience for me as a queer person. At fYrefly, I felt similar to how I did when I attended the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival. I experienced a sense of belonging there; I felt connected with the other people who attended camp because of our shared, lived experience of what it meant to inhabit non-normative bodies in the heterosexualized space of society. I also felt a sense of gratitude for being a part of a camp that endeavoured to make a space for queer and trans\* youth to feel “at home” in their own bodies. One of my favourite parts of camp happens on the first day when the youth walk up to the registration desk with their parents. Seeing them arrive with their suitcases and sleeping bags with their parents looking nervous and excited was moving. I thought back to my own process of self-discovery: how long it took, how it’s still evolving, and how different it could have been had I felt like I could *really* talk about it openly and freely without the shame, confusion, curiosity, fear, and homophobia that churned inside me. I wondered what my life might have looked like, how I might have experienced my coming out process differently had I

had a sense of queer kinship with others and a place like this camp to go to as I was coming out. I felt a combination of sorrow for having missed out on this kind of recognition, affirmation and sense of belonging when I was coming out, and joy for being able to be a part of it now with the campers who come to camp. Watching campers and their parents felt like I was witnessing history change in an instant. It was almost as though I was witnessing the past and what is yet to come all in a few brief moments. It felt like a preview of possibility; a glimpse into the future.

Having been connected to Camp fYrefly for the past three years, and in my capacity as artist-in-residence, I wanted to write a fYrefly “theme song” to celebrate and recognize the importance and necessity of the camp in the lives of the queer and trans\* youth and staff who attended. Synchronously, on the second day of camp, one of the camp participants, a trans\*-identified young man by the name of Chase, approached me and asked if we could write a song together about camp in order to perform it on the last night of camp, at the talent show. I had met Chase two summers ago while working at Camp fYrefly Edmonton. I had seen him perform one of his own spoken word pieces at the Edmonton camp talent show. He had a talent for writing and performance. He was passionate and dynamic, and I was very impressed when I watched him perform that night. So, when he approached me with his idea, I said “yes,” without a moment’s hesitation.

Chase and I met for several two-hour sessions to work on the song. When we got together to write, we both agreed that we wanted to compose a song that recognized the importance of having a place to convene with other queer/trans bodies, in a space that nurtures, reinforces and celebrates queer/trans identities and encourages queer/trans connection. Chase and I endeavoured to encapsulate the positive aspects of what it meant to gather together at Camp fYrefly; the sense of belonging and connection we felt with other attendees, the feeling of being “at home,” and the

feeling that being surrounded by other queer and trans\* bodies helped us feel more comfortable in our own bodies. In composing a song that could be heard, felt, and experienced as a celebratory artistic record of the camp, we sought to link camp members together by inspiring feelings of collective identification with the camp and emphasizing feelings of belonging by documenting some of our experiences at camp. Composing a song that attempted to accomplish these things can be taken as counter-hegemonic in that it highlights and speaks about, to, and for a particular “other,” that is, a group of queer and trans\* people who gather together during the summer specifically to share, recognize, and celebrate what it means to be LGBTQ identified.

First, by jotting down thoughts in a journal, we brainstormed ideas of what we wanted to include in the song: camp activities that were especially enjoyable and noteworthy, and feelings and experiences that were unique to being at Camp fYrefly. Once we developed a list of significant points, we employed several different methods to help us develop the song. I kept track of the ideas and lyrics we generated by taking notes on my laptop so that we could both remember our ideas and work with them easily by moving different words and lyrics around on the page. In order to see what other relevant ideas, thoughts, and feelings might spontaneously arise in him, I suggested that Chase start “talking it out,” that is, just experimenting with ideas, topics, and words as they came to him. When he ran out of ideas, I discovered, by accident, that asking him explicit questions about his camp experiences, and by also requesting that he narrate specific stories or anecdotes related to camp while I typed out what he was relaying to me on my laptop was generative. He then focused his attention on particular accounts of his personal camp experience while I added them to the list of possible subject matter for the song. Asking Chase specific questions about his experience at camp assisted us in “getting at” why camp was so important to him, and why he felt it was so valuable for other LGBTQ youth. I would also add in

my own ideas and lyrics as he spoke. Working with the brainstorm list followed by experimenting with lyrics and wordplay off the top of our heads, and engaging in storytelling interview-style conversation proved to be productive ways to produce ideas for the song. In these ways, we generated a variety of lyrics to work with that he felt were salient aspects of his fYrefly experience. As soon as Chase and I began amassing ideas in our first session together, I experimented with a few chords on my guitar, trying to find the “right musical fit” for the story we were building. In wanting to keep it simple and positive, I settled on an upbeat progression of three major chords, which provided the framework for our song. From that point on, we used the rhythm and timing of the three-chord progression in 4/4 time to shape the song and guide our writing. Playing the chords consistently throughout the sessions kept us focused and “in the groove” as the song started to take shape and come to life. As well, I tracked portions of our creative process by recording partial sessions on my cell phone as we reworked the ideas we wrote down. “Recording while experimenting” allows me to “catch,” or document any lyrical or melodic idea that arises during the creative process.

### **fYreflies**

#### **Chase: Verse**

When I first arrived, I was scared and I was shy  
I didn't know if I was going to be able to  
Look anyone in the eye,  
I was terrified.  
Now, I'm standing here in front of all of you  
Trying to lay down a rhyme, or two  
And I think it's about time I told all of you  
About Camp fYrefly.  
F to the Y to the R - E - F - L - Y  
What's that spell?  
FYREFLY!  
F to the Y to the R - E - F - L - Y  
What's that spell?

FYREFLY!

**Chase: Verse**

I was thrown into my pod and right then and there I saw  
All these friendly faces looking back at me:  
Tattoos, smiles, fabulous style,  
Piercings, crazy hair and whoa, there was glitter like, everywhere!  
And it dawned on me that it's so rare to see  
So many queer bodies in one place,  
And in that moment I thought, "hey  
For the first time in my life, I can finally be myself  
In this positive fYrefly space."

**Kate: Chorus**

fYreflies, glowing in the night  
fYreflies, lighting up our lives  
fYreflies, we are so fine  
fYreflies, this is our time to shine

**Chase: Verse**

Being here is like being back in kindergarten  
Cuz I don't gotta to worry about who's my friend or who's my enemy  
Cuz I have just been accepted into  
My new found family.  
You see, here at fYrefly, there is no prejudice, there's only pride  
And I'm never forced to pick any side!  
I don't gotta worry about which bathroom to use  
Because it doesn't matter if I'm a chick or a dude  
Or anything in between, cuz those binaries are just plain mean.  
This is my time, I can just be me,  
And you can just be you.

**Kate: Chorus**

fYreflies, glowing in the night  
fYreflies, lighting up our lives  
fYreflies, we are so fine  
fYreflies, this is our time to shine

**Chase: Verse**

At fYrefly, I can be proud and I can be bold,  
I don't gotta look over my shoulder  
And worry about who's judging me or who's staring  
Because it's here where I know people truly care.  
You know I love to see all of you smile  
Because in this world we live in

Sometimes that can take a while.  
This camp changes the world, this camp saves lives  
In fact, this camp saved mine.  
Because the people here made me realize that  
There's a reason to be alive.  
At fYrefly, when I look into all of your eyes,  
I feel recognized, I feel empowered and acknowledged  
Like we are all unstoppable, like anything is possible!

**Kate: Chorus**

fYreflies, glowing in the night  
fYreflies, lighting up our lives  
fYreflies, we are so fine  
fYreflies, this is our time to shine

**Chase: Verse**

Laughing, Latin dancing, river rafting, arts and crafting,  
We've got hikes, dykes and open mics  
Sex-ed and that killer food we're fed!  
S'mores and spider dogs and campfire logs  
Singing our hearts out and whispering after "lights out.

We're movement makers, stereotype breakers  
Chance takers, perception shakers and yeah...we're heart breakers!  
We are gender creative, trans celebrative.  
We've got our healthy minds team bringing us queer cheer,  
And to all the volunteers, I'm so glad that you are all here.  
We've got unicorns that are gay  
And what can I say?  
We've got Kate and Tay<sup>11</sup>!

**Kate: Chorus**

fYreflies, glowing in the night  
fYreflies, lighting up our lives  
fYreflies, we are so fine  
fYreflies, this is our time to shine

**Chase: Verse**

Even though our days together at fYrefly will come to a close  
I want you to know that that the bonds  
We have created here will continue on, and on, and on.  
And no matter where we find ourselves

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<sup>11</sup> Chase changed his name from Tay after we composed "fYreflies."

I know that when I yell “fyre,” you’ll yell “fly”  
“fYre?” “fly!” “fYre?” “fly!” “fYre?” “fly!”  
And now it’s time for us to go back into the world  
But when life feels like a roller coaster or one of those tilt-a-whirl rides  
Or if ever you’re feeling hurt or alone,  
Just remember this, you only have 361 days  
Until you get to come back home.

**Chase and Kate: Chorus 2x**  
fYreflies, glowing in the night  
fYreflies, lighting up our lives  
fYreflies, we are so fine  
fYreflies, this is our time to shine

Before I begin talking explicitly about the song, I would like to make a point about the use of “we” in my writing about “fYreflies.” There is necessarily a “we” in collaborative, creative practice. In fact, it could be argued that there is necessarily a “we” in any creative practice, whether “collaborative” or not. Like other forms of knowledge production, creative works are not created in a vacuum: there is no “original” work as all of our work and ideas, both creative and scholarly, are influenced by the world around us, by those with whom we share our lives, and those who have come before us. Knowledge production is built on relationships between people and their ideas. In her essay entitled, “The Music Lesson,” Bresler (2008) discusses the interview process, which she argues involves an “intense attentiveness to the other’s voice. The interviewer is not in the limelight but uses her aural sensitivities to create a structure for the interviewee’s reflection and communication. Mutuality is part of the process” (p. 228). She cites Schutz (1951) who claims it is the “mutual tuning-in relationship by which the ‘I’ and the ‘Thou’ are experienced by both participants as a ‘We’ in vivid presence” (cited in Bresler, 2008, p. 228). In knowledge production through the collaborative songwriting processes for “fYreflies,” the ‘we’ refers specifically to Chase and me. The “we” also expands out beyond



the songwriting process and the song itself to the people we held in mind when we wrote, and it expands further, through time, into the future, to all of the people who will “come into relation” with us by listening to the songs. Art production, whether done in solitude or collaboration, involves being-with (Springgay, 2008) other bodies, knowledges, experiences, and lives. Springgay (2008) characterizes being-with as “a with that opens the self to the vulnerability of the other; a with that is always affected and touched by the other” (p. 157). Springgay builds on Jean-Luc Nancy’s concept of “being-singular-plural” by stating, “to be a body, is to be ‘with’ other bodies, to touch, to encounter, and to be exposed...each individual body is brought into being through encounters with other bodies” (p. 157). That is, we exist because others exist and vice versa: we are constituted in our relations with one another. Gatens (1996) claims that when artists engage in being-with other bodies through their art, this process “opens the possibility of engagement with others as genuine other” (cited in Springgay, 2008, p. 157). Collaborative songwriting was a process in which Chase and I were connected as bodies that co-create, and “fYreflies” was the product of that creative process that drew our bodies together, and fostered a kinship between us, as well as with those in the audience who listened and participated in the song with us. This is the “we” of creative collaboration.

“fYreflies” documents and accounts for some of the experiences of attending a camp for LGBTQ and allied youth. It is auditory evidence of a queer/trans\* orientation between bodies and in writing it, Chase and I attempt to cultivate a sense of queer kinship in our audience—the campers and staff of Camp fYrefly. We composed specific lyrics that oriented our bodies towards our audience and would, we hoped, invite them to orient towards us when we performed the song. This mutual orientation of bodies aims to facilitate a sense of queer relationality between audience and performer and build a queer kinship among those present in the room. In

attempting to orient us towards our audience and inviting our audience to orient themselves towards us, Chase references several things that the campers in the audience would relate to and resonate with, both as camp participants and as queer/trans\* youth. For example, he raps,

I was thrown into my pod and right then and there I saw  
All these friendly faces looking back at me:  
Tattoos, smiles, fabulous style,  
Piercings, crazy hair and whoa, there was glitter like, everywhere!

Here, he speaks to meeting the people in his “pod” for the first time. “Pod” is the name given to the organized groups or teams of campers at camp: each “pod” has a youth leader and an adult volunteer to help guide and support them in their camp experience. The youth leaders and adult volunteers are akin to “camp counsellors.” Each camper is assigned to one pod for the duration of the camp. Pods would be together for certain activities, such as daily debriefs, outdoor team activities, meals, and talent show presentations. In a way, “pods” were like “mini-families” within the larger “family” of Camp fYrefly. In this verse, Chase also references the appearance of his pod members: the tattoos, fabulous style, piercings, crazy hair, and “glitter like, everywhere” aptly describes the appearance of many youth at Camp fYrefly. This lyric draws out a point of connection by accounting for and describing a “shared appearance” of Camp fYrefly youth.

Listing a variety of activities and experiences that are unique to the Camp fYrefly experience was another way Chase and I attempted to foster a sense of kinship among our audience members. For example, Chase raps,

Laughing, Latin dancing, river rafting, arts and crafting,  
We’ve got hikes, dykes and open mics  
Sex-ed and that killer food we’re fed!  
S’mores and spider dogs and campfire logs  
Singing our hearts out and whispering after “lights out.

Here, Chase references a number of camp experiences to remind campers of the things that make Camp fYrefly distinct from quotidian life outside of camp. This is another example of a lyric that orients us towards our audience: in naming some of the experiences at camp, we acknowledge some of the memorable aspects of what it means to be present at camp. This lyric also invited the audience to orient towards us because they recognize and resonate with what we are referencing in this lyric. In performing lyrics that provide very concrete images, Chase reminds campers of these experiences in an attempt to draw them closer to us, as performers of the song, and to create a sense of belonging among their fellow campers and camp staff. This sense of belonging or relationality is necessarily a part of what comprises and fosters a queer kinship among camp participants and staff.

Chase and I also endeavoured to create a sense of belonging and kinship by making the song interactive so that our audience could participate in singing the song with us. Chase expressed in our first songwriting session that he wanted to build audience participation into the song. He developed an introduction to the song that incorporated a call-and-response lyric. He performed this section a cappella and solo, that is without guitar accompaniment, as a way to introduce the song. He built in audience participation by inviting campers and staff to “be a part of the song” by calling out, “f- to the -y- to the - r - e - f - l - y what’s that spell?,” to which the audience was to respond, “fYrefly!” This exemplifies how the song aims to create a felt sense in listeners that they belong to the fYrefly community. It also follows in the footsteps of the North American folk music tradition, where

the artist/activists of the folk music revival strove to break down the walls between performer and audience by celebrating singing and making music together in a live

concert setting, engaging the audience in collective music making through words and music. (Bakan, 2013, p. 8)

On collective music-making between performer and audience, Bakan continues:

In encouraging the audience to sing along, to take ownership of the musical moment, the musician—who now stands as facilitator, pedagogue and activist as well as artist—offers a narrative musical form through which community can be strengthened, defined, nurtured, and reinforced. (p. 8)

By including a call-and-response lyric in the song and inviting the audience to participate in “collective music-making” or musicing (Elliott, 1995) along with us, Chase and I attempted to “break down the walls” between us as songwriters-performers and our camp peers to create a feeling of belonging, and to reinforce a sense of kinship between queer and trans\* bodies at camp.

At the end of the song, Chase incorporates the call-and-response approach again, changing it slightly but desiring the same ultimate effect of audience participation. This time, he borrows the camp coordinator’s strategy of getting everyone’s attention in the room in order to make announcements, a strategy familiar to everyone at camp. Whenever the coordinator yelled out, “When I say ‘fYre,’ you say ‘fly’! ‘Fyre?’” everyone knew they were to stop what they were doing and respond by yelling back, “fly!” after which the coordinator would make an announcement. Chase incorporated this near the end of the song to encourage audience participation for a second time. He prefaces this call-and-response by acknowledging the “bonds” that have been created between camp participants through their shared time together at fYrefly. He declares,

Even though our days together at fYrefly will come to a close  
I want you to know that that the bonds  
We have created here will continue on, and on, and on.  
And no matter where we find ourselves  
I know that when I yell “fyre,” you’ll yell “fly”

“fYre?”

Audience: “fly!”

“fYre?”

Audience: “fly!”

“fYre?”

Audience: “fly!”

Again, this is an example of how Chase used lyrics to orient the audience body towards us, and us towards them. Call-and-response is used to invite audience participation, and it is a back-and-forth conversation in a song that links bodies together through the shared act of “conversing.” It cultivates a sense of togetherness, and in the case of “fYreflies,” it creates a sense of kinship through the familiarity of the phrases Chase employed in the song. Further, as the audience listened to and watched our performance, “fYreflies” penetrated the bodies of the audience through their ears and eyes, and then also came out of the members of the audience as they sang along, engaging in call-and-response with us. What I am trying to get at here is that when we performed “fYreflies” for the camp that night, it became part of each body in the audience as a *mobile, auditory, queer archive*, just like all of my songs do when I perform them in public spaces. As “fYreflies” passed from our bodies to the bodies of the campers and staff in the audience, it took on the quality of a queer bloodline, where a bloodline passes between the bodies of family members.

As stated earlier in this thesis, one of the mottos of Camp fYrefly is that for four days out of the year, it becomes a “home” for campers, a place where they can feel safer and more free to be who they are as queer and trans\* individuals. Chase makes a general reference to how life can sometimes be challenging out there in mainstream society, after which he reminds listeners that in 361 days, they get to “come home,” that is, they get to return to camp. The comparison of “camp” to “home” is a deliberate attempt to engender strong feelings of connection to the camp

and its participants. Implicit in this phrase is the idea that Camp fYrefly can be likened to a “chosen family” for many campers.

And now it's time for us to go back into the world  
But when life feels like a roller coaster or one of those tilt-a-whirl rides  
Or if ever you're feeling hurt or alone,  
Just remember this, you only have 361 days  
Until you get to come back home.

Chase's use of the phrase “you only have 361 days until you get to come back home,” suggests there is a stronger connection to camp than simply the bonds of friendship and belonging. Because this phrase is familiar to campers and staff alike, as it is a phrase often used by the camp co-director when opening and closing camp each summer, incorporating it into the song provides a strong point of connection between campers, staff, and Camp fYrefly as “home.” Using the word “home” in reference to Camp fYrefly speaks to the notion of chosen family and the idea that “home” can be felt and found among people who share similar lived experiences, in this case, the shared experiences of being queer and trans\* people, and of attending a camp for queer-trans\* youth together. Coming home to Camp fYrefly after 361 days is like coming home to family, not the biological kind but the kind we choose to be with as queer and trans\* people. “fYreflies” attempts to remind campers and staff that they have a chosen family waiting for them at camp. “fYreflies,” then, seems to be what Ahmed (2006) refers to as a “homing device” (p. 9): as campers and staff alike listen to the song it reminds them where “home” is, how long it will be until they get to be there, and what they will experience when they arrive. “fYreflies” calls out to campers and staff that home can also be a place we choose to be where we share space and time with individuals who are like us, people who inhabit queer and trans\* bodies.

As Chase and I continued writing, we grappled with how to express the notion of coming together with one's "chosen family" at fYrefly. Here, we are attempting to locate a descriptive word to go with "family" that is similar to the idea of "chosen family." Below is the conversation we had that led us to the completion of this verse.

K-I also feel like I want something in here. Cuz I'm missing the word "chosen" but I don't necessarily want that word, I just feel like I'm missing some kind of descriptor in there.

C-Yeah. I just found my new gay family? (*laughter*)

K-My new amazing family, my new loving family, my new accepting family?

C-Cuz I just found my new accepting family? No.

K-No. (*typing*) I'm just checking out some thesaurus stuff here: inclusive, wide-ranging, all-encompassing, my complete family, my general family, narrow (*more typing*) conceding, tolerant, consenting, undertaking. What is it? What kind of family does it feel like at fYrefly when you're there?

C-Accepting. Cuz I've just been "accepted" into my new family?

K-That's kind of nice. Try that. (*typing*) Wanna try that?

C-It could be "my new found family."

K-Ooh, that's kind of a nice. It has a nice, little alliterative ring to it. (*playing chords*)

C-(*slamming*) <Being here is like being back in kindergarten, I don't have to worry about whose my friend or whose my enemy 'cause I've just been accepted into my new found family>

K-I like that! That's good. Do you like that?

C-Yep.

Ahmed (2006) posits that "queer bodies are out of place in certain family gatherings, which is what produces in the first place, a queer effect" (p. 174). However, at Camp fYrefly, queer bodies are "in place" because they are surrounded by a "found family," that is, they are among campers and staff who attend Camp fYrefly. It is a place where queer and trans\* bodies gather. In this way, "fYreflies" attempts to "trace the line for a different genealogy, one that would embrace the failure to inherit the family line as the condition of possibility for another way of dwelling in the world (Ahmed, 2006, p. 178). In other words, "home" and "family" can be found in other spaces and bodies and gatherings, and these things can be traced through song.

“fYreflies” seemed to draw the audience together when Chase and I performed it on the last night of camp. Chase’s idea of including the call-and-response parts was ingenious, as everyone in the room participated in the song with us, just as we had hoped. Campers and staff had their arms around each other as they sang along with Chase and I, and all of our bodies moved together simultaneously, our voices singing loudly in unison. As “fYreflies” permeated and passed between the bodies in the room that night, it made that connection and kinship between bodies heard and felt. In those moments, we were one voice, all of us united in the singing together of “fYreflies.” It felt like we were a “found family,” just for those four days: the kind of family that came together singing about the shared experience of being queer and trans\* and attending camp together. Because of this, we were oriented towards one another in ways that we wouldn’t have otherwise. Perhaps, as queerly-oriented bodies who act “out of line with others” (Ahmed, 2006, p. 107) and “cut across ‘slantwise’ the vertical and horizontal lines of conventional genealogy” (Bell & Binnie, 2000, cited in Ahmed, 2006, p. 107), Chase and I re-oriented and re-aligned ourselves to each other, and to the other people at camp, in the writing and performing of “fYreflies”. Indeed, Chase and I had passed along something important to the rest of Camp fYrefly that evening: a song that they could listen to and sing along with again and again; a song that would live inside them even as they left camp and went back to their lives; and a song that would remind them that there was a home for them at Camp fYrefly. In this way, our queer genealogy was sown together in song.



## Chapter 6: “How I Would Make it Home”: Concluding Thoughts

For me, music is at the centre of everything. It’s something that binds people together through centuries, through millennium. It’s undefinable. And nobody’s ever going to have the answer to it. But it’s great fun exploring it.

—Keith Richards, *Under the Influence*, 2015

If we do not figure out who we came from and where we come from, we are orphans.

—Ferron, interview with Gregg Shapiro, Sept. 19, 2008

As a young woman attempting to grapple with her burgeoning queer/dyke/lesbian sexuality, I was an orphan; I did not have any queer elders or relations in my family from whom I could learn what it might be like to live my life as someone did not follow the scripts and norms of hetero-cis-sexuality. As I moved into young adulthood and began to attempt to make sense of the unfamiliar, messy, frightening, and oftentimes joyful feelings I was experiencing as a “baby dyke”—a young woman who was coming into her lesbian sexuality—I had to figure out where the queer part of me came from, and how one even *does* queer, for this eluded me from the outset. When I think about my family and my place in it, I am grateful for the many parts of myself that I can locate in my family members, and I am appreciative for many of the things I have in common with several of them. Yet, that is not what this project has been about. It has been about the parts of me that I could not locate or account for through my family. Here, at the end of this project, I am still unable to understand who or where my queerness “comes from” in a familial sense. However, I do have a greater understanding of the queer musical lineage of which I have come to be a part and the ways in which I was able to locate myself in the songs of the queer and lesbian singer-songwriters who came before me, and then later, in my own songs. I have come to recognize that the songs written by queer and lesbian activist artists and singer-

songwriters—songs that helped birth my queerself into this world—were songs that mothered me and provided me with a greater understanding of the queerness in me, giving me a sense of kinship with other queer people. Listening to the music of singer-songwriters like Indigo Girls, Ani DiFranco, and Ferron, and then writing and singing my own songs, gave me a place to land, and a sense that I could *call queer home*. I listened to their songs, which in turn, inhabited my body, birthing and mentoring me into queerness and a life where I found my way to other queer bodies. Songwriting and singing have connected me to other bodies, that is, to people in audiences and to other artists *in a queer way*—a way that highlights a kinship felt, not through familial connection, but through the shared heuristic of living queer lives in queer bodies.

Songwriting and singing are of the body; they are bodily acts. They are also acts that tell stories, stories that are archived in sound, language, and performance. My own songs, which were inspired by others' songs, are also housed in my body and have become a part of my lineage—outlining the stories that trace my life, and the lives of others, in song. It is an embodied experience to engage in the storytelling acts of songwriting and singing. That is, when I take part in these artistic practices, they provide me access to my bodily, sensory knowledge, which has helped me to uncover and attend to the parts of myself, that is, the queerness in me, with which I was unfamiliar and uncomfortable. This, in turn, has allowed me, while grappling with my sexual and gender identity, to make sense of and account for who I am in relation to others. By documenting and archiving my life and the lives of others through songwriting and singing, I have been archiving my lived experiences and accounting for myself in relation to others. By turning to and relying on songs—my own and those of queer and lesbian singer-songwriters—as mobile archives that pass between bodies, I have traced a queer genealogy for myself and others, through song. With music as my guide, I have made human connections,

orienting myself away from some bodies and towards others: both on and off the stage. In this thesis, I have told some of the stories of these connections, connections that I have deliberately sought out and other connections that were more spontaneous. Songwriting and performance are at the heart of these connections—it is through these practices that I have connected with and come to better know myself and others.

### **Revisiting My Questions, My Thinking, the Process, the Songs**

Here, I return to the research questions that fuelled this project:

1. How do the musical practices of songwriting and singing help one account for oneself?
2. How does the composing and singing of queer songs help one orient one's body towards other queer bodies, and, in doing so, help one to “find one's way”?
3. How does writing and singing queer songs do the work of building an archive of queer kinship?
4. How does an archive of queer kinship constitute an inventive queer genealogy?

Using the questions above and drawing on a range of scholarship, I have examined how composing and singing queer songs have helped me account for myself as a queer/dyke/lesbian and enabled me to form kinship relations with others. I grounded my discussion in my desire for a queer lineage by arguing how we might “queer genealogy” by engaging in “queer musical lineaging,” through the listening to, composing and performing of queer songs. I made use of Halberstam's (2005) notion of “queer time” to elucidate my “birth” into queerness during a time when I was listening to the music of queer and lesbian singer-songwriters. Drawing from the scholarship of Kumbier (2013) and McBane (2011), I examined how queer songs contribute to

an archive of queer lived experience, which fosters connections between people and engenders a sense of belonging.

Ideas around the notion of embodiment were fundamental to this project. Elliott's (1995) scholarship on the embodied nature of songwriting and singing, or rather, "musicizing," was crucial in guiding my thinking around how songs are created through the body and by bodily acts, and how songs are composed in connection with others and links us to one another. As Stoller (1984) contends, "sound has the power to bond" (cited in Bresler, 2008, p. 227). Following this research on music-listening and music-making as corporeal processes, I "turned towards" and worked deeply with Ahmed's (2004, 2006) scholarship on orientation, in particular her concepts of "finding one's way" and how when one orients oneself towards others this is necessarily a part of finding one's way in the world. Orienting myself in the world and towards other people through music became a central theme in my work on this thesis. I borrowed Ahmed's phrase when I spoke of songs as "homing devices," where songs helped me to feel "at home" with my queerself and with other queer people. In this way, home became a destination—a place at which I arrived through listening to the songs of queer and lesbian singer-songwriters and subsequently through my own songwriting and singing—rather than a place from which I originated. Connecting Elliott's (1995) and Bresler's (2008) work on the embodiment of musical practices with that of Ahmed's notion of orientation was important, and inspired me to consider how songs are born from bodies, and then, when shared through the act of singing, move between bodies, linking them together in music. This thinking also led me to ponder that, because songs move between bodies, they are mobile archives—stories that are passed down from songwriter to listener, body to body.

The scholarship of Cvetkovich (2003), whose work on publics and the archive reiterates that, “in the face of institutional neglect, along with erased and invisible histories, gay and lesbian archives have been formed through grassroots efforts” (p. 8) was also central to my project. Queer performance is indeed an example of a grassroots effort that creates a public and archives queer lives. Cvetkovich’s work around the notion of grassroots efforts that build archives led me to think more deeply about how “performer cultures and queer publics are mutually constituting” (Cvetkovich, 2003, p. 9), and how this relates, more explicitly, to my project where queer kinship and construction of a lineage through songwriting and singing are concerned. This thesis has attempted to map out and weave together the scholarship I have revisited here as it relates to my engagement with music over the years, both in listening to songs, and in engaging in the practices of songwriting and singing as a way to document and archive my life, and to orient me towards and lead me to other queer bodies with whom I could develop kinship relations. It has also helped me to think more deeply about what genealogy might look (and sound) like, and how one can trace one’s life and lineage through song.

Methodologically speaking, this work was grounded in the tenets of arts-based research. Over the years, the artistic practices of songwriting, singing, poetry, and storytelling have allowed me to experience the world through my body and my senses in a profoundly corporeal way. Art making “brings me back into my body”: it calls me to pay attention to and make sense of my experiences. It made sense, then, to focus on these practices as a way to conduct research. Indeed, Higgs (2008) posits, “art making, as a research method, allows the researcher to experience directly through the senses (empirically) the dialectical interactions between the self and the medium of expression” (p. 9). Simultaneously, arts-based research also invites the audience to pay attention differently, to enter into the research themselves and experience it

alongside the researcher. Here, I return to the work of Barone and Eisner (2012) who claim arts-based research endeavours “raise questions about important social issues by enticing members of an audience into vicariously reexperience [*sic*]dimensions of the social world within an artistic engagement” (p. 62). Therefore, while I have come to know and understand more about how engagement with the social world through artistic practice helps me to make sense of myself and the world, it is my hope that my writing here has also done the work of “inviting members of an audience into the experiencing aspects of a world that may have been otherwise outside their range of sight and to thereby cause them to question usual, commonplace, orthodox perspectives on social phenomena” (Barone & Eisner, 2012, p. 56). I hope that I have told the story of this project in such a way that it not only “makes new worlds” (Barone & Eisner, 2012, p. 56), but also raises new questions and ideas.

In working with autoethnographic methods, I have attempted to “narrate the story” of this work using a variety of different written methods: poetry, story, lyric, and conversation. Over the years, scholars have conducted autoethnography in a multitude of ways. In the case of this project, I have broadly characterized my work here as taking an autoethnographic approach—an approach that attends to a multi-sensory experience of how songwriting and singing have allowed me to account for and orient myself in relation to others. Certainly, there are many different ways of doing autoethnographic work; I am simply adding to the conversation my interpretation of what autoethnography can look like. Indeed, one of the limitations of my methodology and autoethnographic approach was the reliance solely on written accounts, which, in turn, depends on my memory to tell the story of this project. Memory is a precarious thing; we remember some events and forget others; we add and delete certain details relating to our experiences. We may exaggerate some experiences and downplay others. Chang (2008) claims,

“omission and addition are natural occurrences in our recalling. In the same way as subjectivity, they are detrimental to our autobiographic research endeavor unless they are properly recognized and disciplined” (p. 6).

Chang also asserts that when “autoethnographers recall past experiences, they do not randomly harvest bits of fragmented memories. Rather, they select some according to their research focus and data collection criteria” (p. 8). I chose, very carefully, which songs, stories, and journal entries to include here that would address my research questions and tell the story of how music was both integral to my understanding of my sexual and gender identity and to my connections and relations with other people. Certainly, with some of the songs I have included here, I took “creative liberties” when composing them: I added embellishments and details in places in order to create a rich and layered listening experience. And yet, while some of the events I include in some of the songs are fictional, they are based on *real feelings, thoughts and images in my mind*, which I use to assist me in crafting a story. “Co-op Girlz” is an example of this in that the majority of the events narrated in this song are based on feelings and emotions rather than direct experience. Creating a story where certain events become the metaphor for a particular emotion produces strong imagery in the listener’s mind. As a songwriter, it is more important for me to convey emotion in a song, rather than to simply recount events because it is the emotion that will resonate with the listener and contribute to a bodily response, which in turn, is when the connection between bodies—performer and listeners—occurs. What I am trying to say here is that narrating the *story of a feeling* rather than only narrating the event itself is how I have come to account for myself and find my way in the world and connect with others through songwriting. Feelings are “of the body” and are shared human experiences, whereas “events” are outside the body and may not necessarily be shared experiences between people. Therefore, it is

the relaying of emotions that occur in tandem with a given experience that is important for me to narrate in my songs. As well, introducing each song by contextualizing it with a story was a way to “set the stage” for each song in the hopes that it helped to “fill in the richness, nuance, and complexity of the landscape” (Clandinin & Connelly, cited in Chang, 2008, p. 6) of the overall story I have been telling here. Finally, including portions of daily journal accounts and narratives from my formative years, both as a child and as a newly queer person, adds brush strokes of colour to the storying of this project.

To be sure, destabilizing normative assumptions about gender and sexuality while attempting to make these topics “the focus of collective conversations” (Cvetkovich, 2003, p. 4) has certainly been part of the motivation for my desire to compose songs. However, what I was not prepared for when I first began singing in public spaces was the way in which my own assumptions about gender and sexuality would be underscored, and certainly, I have been reminded of this as I have written this thesis. Following Gallagher (2011) who argues that theatre as a method of inquiry can “invite the unsaid, the masked, the contested, the contradictory” (p. 51), I have discovered that songwriting and performance have functioned in similar ways for me. Time after time, I have found myself (pleasantly) surprised when a heterosexual-identified person appreciates my songs (and similarly confused when, for example, a lesbian-identified woman is uninterested in my work) as reminders of the ease with which I categorize and formulate assumptions about people, regardless of how they identify. Performing illuminates my own rigid conceptions and stereotypes about the kinds of people who I believe might appreciate my work and attend my performances. Further, becoming more familiar with some of the ways of thinking presented in queer theory has also caused me to reflect on and question the ways in which I construct binary categories related to LGBTQ identities and those identities that are



more normative.

Lastly, this research has extended beyond the boundaries of “ethnography,” in a way, by questioning the boundaries of “queer counterpublic” and “queer subculture,” and discussing how my songs connected me with social-cultural relations and familial relations that weren’t necessarily queer-identified. I have come to see more clearly that I am connected to people from different subcultures and groups through my music and the music of others, and that music—even music that tells stories of queer lived experience—binds people together, because ultimately, songs are stories of the experience of “becoming human” (Leggo, 2004). In this way, while ultimately aiming to “reflect the interconnectivity of the self and others” (Chang, 2008, p. 15), that is, those who move between the queer publics and subcultures in which I find myself, this project has troubled the “ethnos” in autoethnography where autoethnography typically focuses on a singular culture. Songs have the ability to reach across the boundaries of different publics and subcultures as they move between and among public spaces and bodies, and some of the songs I included here speak to the crossing of those boundaries.

The bulk of my “data,” or rather the “field texts” I analyzed and interpreted—the songs and their accompanying stories—resides in the two chapters following the chapter on methodology and methods. I chose six songs that provided a well-rounded account of how music guided and mothered me as I learned to acknowledge and become comfortable with what it meant to be a queer/dyke/lesbian person. In these two chapters, I applied the theoretical ideas with which I had been grappling as well as some of the scholarship from the literature review I had conducted for this project. I will now summarize the key findings of these chapters.

The song “Ex-Junkie Boyfriend” talks about a time when I was “lost” in a world in which I did not want to continue to participate. At the time in my life about which this song was

written, I was coming to the realization that I had to learn how to re-orient myself towards women. It is about stepping out onto a path, for the first time, where I would begin to find a way into my desire for a life with women. Writing the song, many years after that relationship had ended, was like writing a window into my past. It was a journey backwards that allowed me to revisit who I was then in relation to who I had become nearly 10 years later: a queer-lesbian singer-songwriter. In this way, the excursion back in time that I took in composing “Ex-Junkie Boyfriend” exemplified to me a kind of *outing*. It was the story of how I began to move out of a stagnant way of living and the life I had created for myself, and out of the closet and into a greater understanding of myself and the kind of woman I wanted to be. This points back to Ahmed’s (2006) notion of finding one’s way: I was trying to find my way while in that relationship, and in writing the song years later, I came to understand how I was beginning to do so back then.

“Co-op Girlz” tells an inventive tale of how I left a heterosexual way of being and began to orient, not only myself but also my feelings towards women. As a conjured story, it is based on feeling rather than lived experience. But does that make it less real? What is lived experience if not experiencing feelings and thoughts? While the “events” I sing about in “Co-op Girlz” are fabricated, the feelings and fantasies that drove the song were very real. “Co-op Girlz” made real, in song, the feelings and fantasies I had about the possibility of dating one of the women from the co-op. More than anything, this song is an “archive of feelings” (Cvetkovich, 2003) that accounts for and documents the emotional terrain I traversed as I walked through the doors of the co-op. Certainly, it is a popular song in my repertoire, which tells me that many people can relate to the story and the feelings and scenes described within: many of us can attest to feeling like outsiders or “rookies” at some point or another in our lives. Cvetkovich (2003) points out how,

for her, the work of queer, feminist bands like Le Tigre and Tribe 8 “articulates better than I can what I want to say” (p. 1). The music of queer and lesbian singer-songwriters I listened to certainly did the same for me, and in turn, the act of writing down and putting to music my feelings and experiences helped me to articulate them in a way that I was not able to verbally. Further, inventing a story around real, palpable feelings of shame—the shame of “not being lesbian enough” and not understanding how to navigate what it would mean to date a woman—was the only way in which I could articulate these very real feelings. It wasn’t enough to simply name my shame: I needed to tell it in a story. In this way, “Co-op Girlz” shapes “the archive in which my feelings were deposited” (Cvetkovich, 2003, p. 1).

In the years of songwriting I have done, it can be said that I have been “writing personal memoirs to document queer histories” (Kumbier, 2014, p. 14). Marcus’ (2005) notion of “auto-archiving” (as cited in Kumbier, 2013, p. 14) is exemplified in the song “The Only Dyke at the Open Mic,” because writing (and singing) a personal memoir of *singing about singing about* being a dyke in a particular public space documents my own queer history; it tells a queer story. As well, it is a disruption of heterosexualized space because it uses the reclaimed language of “dyke” (which counters the more “proper” label of “lesbian,” which is itself an identity that counters normative heterosexual identity) and reveals a moment at the end of the song where an “old boy from the bar” approaches me and reveals that he too, would like to be a lesbian. In this way, this man disrupted my expectation about how a heterosexual man in a “straight space” might react to me and my songs. That he told me he wished he too was a lesbian was queering of sorts; I was unprepared for his response, as well as for the brief moment where we were bonded together as human beings through that exchange. Does this mean that heterosexual people can also “queer” things, like spaces and expectations? He certainly did so that night. In fact, it

becomes the crux of the song, the place where my fears about homophobic reactions and disinterest in my performance are resolved. Somehow, with his humorous statement, he was orienting himself towards me, even as we identified very differently in the world. He made my lesbianism “ok,” and in turn, I was “ok” with him as a heterosexual man I met randomly one night in a bar. In that moment of connection, of kinship, he and I were *becoming human* together. This is the “queering of the ethnos” in autoethnography that I spoke of earlier, where even a performance of queer songs can bond two people in a brief moment regardless of their identity markers and the culture from which they hail.

“Rise Up” was a song that I composed after an encounter with one of the lesbian singer-songwriters who had the most impact on me, my “coming out” process, and on my musicianship. It is a song that narrates some of the reflections and feelings I had after that interaction with her. Ferron’s songs had been residing in my body—her lyrics, her stories, her voice, and her melodies—since I had first discovered her music, which was, incidentally, during the period of my life when I began to have my first intimate relationship with a woman. Ferron’s songs became the “soundtrack of my coming out” and facilitated my discovery of what it meant to be with a woman; her songs inhabited my body and travelled with me as I moved into life as a queer-lesbian identified woman. “Rise Up” is an homage to her work and the impact it had on me as a queer-lesbian person and a musician, and it marked a passing down of a musical style between Ferron’s body and mine. As she sang and played, I listened and learned, and then in turn, produced “Rise Up”, which was inspired both by her work and by an encounter with her. It is an example of where I oriented myself toward Ferron’s songs, and Ferron as a queer body, mentor, elder, and “lesbian folksinging-foremother.”

The song “Captain Cupcake and the Cambie Hotel” tells a story of a chance encounter with a man who disclosed to my companion and me, after my performance in a run-down roadhouse, his penchant for donning women’s clothing. Captain Cupcake, or so he was called by his shipmates, was a “cross-dressing, tug-boating, rough-neck from Nanaimo” who happened to be present in the Cambie Hotel, drinking beer much like everyone else the night I performed there back in the fall of 2009. Shortly after meeting him, I composed “Captain Cupcake and the Cambie Hotel,” which documents a queer encounter in an unqueer place. Walking into the Cambie, I was unprepared for the presence of other queer people in that “straight room”; it was not something I expected to happen. The beginning of the song narrates some of my fears of performing in yet another (presumably) “straight room” and being pleasantly surprised by the presence of other non-normative bodies, such as the openly trans woman lead singer of the headlining band, and, in particular, Captain Cupcake. His was a particularly queer presence in the audience that night; he disrupted my expectations of what an ordinary looking, heterosexual man in a run-of-the-mill tavern might be like. To say that I was astonished when hearing his story about how he drove a tugboat for a living, how he sometimes wore women’s clothes to work, how his shipmates referred to him as Captain Cupcake, and how he got married to his female partner in a wedding dress was something worthy of a song. And, had it not been for the songs I sang that night—songs about grappling with my gender and sexual identity—Captain Cupcake and I would not have found each other. If I had performed songs about heterosexual love, the environment, political issues, or any of the other topics that singer-songwriters sing about, I’m quite sure he and I would have passed like ships in the night (pardon the pun!), never having the chance to meet and swap stories the way we did. Captain Cupcake felt compelled to reach out to my companion and me because he related to my stories, and he wanted to share a bit

of his own. My performance on stage that night was the catalyst drew us together. The songs literally drew our bodies together in conversation and connection after I exited the stage. Prior to that performance, I was unaware that Captain Cupcake existed. Yet, it was this chance meeting between two queer bodies—performer and audience member, mine and his—that inspired the song; without the songs I performed that night and without his desire to tell his own story to my companion and me afterwards, I would have not written the song. In this way, the songs I sang that night brought us into relation with one another and also birthed another song about queer lived experience.

The song “fYreflies” was written in relationship with my young friend, Chase, and with a particular audience in mind as we composed. The goal of composing “fYreflies” together was to create a song that told the story of one person’s experience at a camp for LGBTQ and allied youth in such a way that it might resonate with our intended audience, that is, the campers, staff, and volunteers of Camp fYrefly. Bakan (2013) views song as an “interconnected enacted text,” where “a song may be formed out of a community and may be informed by definitions birthed by specific cultural narratives” (p. 9). I compose songs from a place of interconnectedness: with the songwriters before me, with the people in my life, and with my listenership. Certainly it was this interconnectedness that came into play when composing “fYreflies” with Chase. There is a kinship among my queer and trans\* friends, loved ones and listeners that I draw upon when I compose music. Furthermore, I also draw upon the kinship I feel with the queer and lesbian songwriters whose work I have listened to and learned from over the years. All of these ways of relating to other people point to how songs can stitch together a genealogy by bringing bodies into relation and connection with one another. Songwriting and performing songs about shared

lived experience, where the songs pass between and among bodies, is an act of musical lineaging.

“fYreflies” illustrates how queer musical lineaging works. It is a song that was written by a queer mentor (myself) and a trans\* mentee (Chase) about his lived experience as a trans\* youth and what it meant to attend a camp designed specifically for LGBTQ youth, and it was performed for an audience of LGBTQ youth and adults at Camp fYrefly. It is a song that demonstrates the “handing down” of a songwriting tradition that is centred on composing songs about non-normative identities as a way to document and archive the lives of people who carry these identities. “fYreflies” brought Chase and me into relation with each another, and it fostered a kinship with the other campers and staff of Camp fYrefly as we performed it for them, evidenced by their exuberant response to the song throughout and at the end of the performance. When I write here about queer musical lineaging, I am not referring to Chase as queer; to be clear, he identifies as trans\*. The “queer” in queer musical lineaging refers to the *queering of lineage and genealogy* through the artistic practices of songwriting and singing. Queer musical lineage is about creating kinship connections through the composing, performing, and passing along of songs about the lived experience of those who live in non-normative bodies. “fYreflies” is a celebration that our bodies were not “out of place,” but rather that they belong, together at a camp—a place where many people shared the experience of being LGBTQ. “fYreflies” signified that the camp was more of a “home as destination” rather than “home as origin.”

### **“She’ll Come Back and Lay Down My Bones”**

Jewish lesbian folksinger Alix Dobkin once claimed “women’s music was created by lesbians because we needed it, we had to have it” (Mosbacher & Sandstrom, 2002). I began

creating music because it was fundamental to how I came to understand myself and those around me. I “had to have it,” for without the language of music, I do not know how I would have named and located myself in the world; I do not know if I would have found my way. The music composed by queer and lesbian singer-songwriters that I listened to was a gift of life-saving (life-defining) proportions. Music provided me *someone* towards whom I could orient myself (towards other queer and lesbian bodies), and *some way* in which I could orient my body (through composing and singing my own songs).

Ahmed’s (2006) work on orientation has proven to be very generative for this project. She focuses on the notion of orientation as an action, that is, a thing that bodies *do*; we turn ourselves, our hearts and minds towards some people and away from others. However, orientation is as much about orienting one’s body towards certain other bodies as it is about experiencing an “introduction to a situation” (*Online Etymology Dictionary*, n.d.), where one is introduced and helped to feel comfortable and familiar with a new experience, situation, for example a new job or a new school. In this case, my orientation to the “situation of being queer” came in the form of the songs of queer and lesbian singer-songwriters who provided stories of their lived experience in music. Further, in conducting most of my research here through the act of writing—whether in poetry, story, or song—“I have learned, presently and retrospectively, how much writing has to do with that recognition of and ‘I,’ who is also...one of ‘them’ (Greene, 1995, p. 106). Writing, in its many forms, and more specifically, writing and singing songs has taught me much more about who I am in relation to others and how these relationships, no matter how enduring or momentary, have helped me to account for and make sense of who I am—as an artist, queer/dyke/lesbian woman.



Over the years, I've questioned the queer/dyke/lesbian content of my songs, and so have some other folks. Someone once used the expression "in-your-face" to describe the lyrical content of my songs. Yet, I continue to feel compelled to tell this part of my and others' stories: to name it, sing it, and share it with people. At one point, I asked a wise older friend and musical mentor of mine, "Do you think people write about the same thing over and over until they come to terms with it, and then when they come to terms with it, they move on to write about other topics?" He looked at me thoughtfully and said, "Probably." Along with the voices of other critics, there is an inner critic's voice that, now and then, poses the question, "Why can't you just write a nondescript pop song?" My snappy answer is "Because it's already been done—a million times!" However, my more thoughtful answer is because singing about it has helped me to make sense of who I am; it has helped me account for and locate myself in the world and make connections with other people. Songwriting and singing has made my queerness material and audible, and it has allowed me to build connections with others. In the songs I write, I see and hear myself, I see and hear others like me, but I have also come to understand that the lines that I draw between myself and those I perceive as unlike me, are not always so definitive. One thing I am confident of is that music is the thing that I hold onto in my life when everything else falls away, because it always leads me back home to myself, and to a place where I can continue to inquire into who I am and how it is that I belong in this world.

As Carl Leggo (2008) claims, "we make sense of our lives in stories" (p. 9). I make sense of my life in song, and the performance of those songs. The act of writing and performing songs has proven to be a catalytic source of transformation and sparked my birthing process into becoming queer. It has been a source of resistance for me, as well as practice through which I have made connections with other people—queer, not-so-queer and the range of identities in

between. The songs I sing are about lived experience—mine and others’—and they provide me with a sense of belonging, a sense that I am not alone in the world, and that I share something with those whose experience(s) may be similar to mine. Susan Griffin observes, “the self does not exist in isolation” because “to know the self is to enter a social process” (cited in Leggo, 2004, p. 32). The songs of certain queer and lesbian singer-songwriters provided a different kind of lifeline for me—a lifeline that made them, and their lives and loves audible, which helped me recognize myself in a way that I wasn’t able to do growing up in a family and society that provided no alternative models of loving and living. As Maracle (2008) said about her Indigenous elders, “I can’t know who I am without knowing who they were” (p. 130).

Queer values, beliefs and ways of being were “handed down” to me through the oral tradition of song and now I, in turn, pass these “queer traditions” on through songwriting and performance. Songs became the “homing devices” that helped me to find my way in my own body, and also “home” to myself, and to a kinship of queer people. I sing queer stories; it is music for and about queer lives, and it is music that contributes to an archive of queer kinship, interrupts dominant narratives of gender and sexuality, and connects queer bodies to one another, constructing a queer genealogy. Indeed, my queer musical lineage is comprised of a long line of songs.

I return to Lee Maracle’s (2008) declaration in her story “Goodbye “Snauq,” that “there is no ceremony to grieve the loss of a village” (p. 125). How do human beings mourn when their village and their birthplace is destroyed by trespassers, the colonizers? How do they watch, like Maracle’s elders did, as their village is burned down to the ground while they are shipped off to live on a small settlement separated from the land where they had previously lived? That kind of loss is unknowable to me. But, as a queer person, I do know what it is like to grow up not

knowing my queer elders, and not knowing a queer village, family, or lineage from which I sprang. Because of this, I have built my own queer village, and found my way to queer kin by listening to their rallying calls. I have documented my own stories in music and called out to my queer relations in song. Certainly, this is one of the ways in which people can be united, by listening to the other voices around us that beckon us, guide us, and help us to find our way to one another among the thousands of bodies we pass in a day. After all, as one of Maracle's (2008) elders claimed, "everything begins with a song" (p. 134). And perhaps, these songs are little ceremonies, little celebrations of sound that actually do big things, like helping us feel like we belong to others, a network of people—unrelated through things like blood and biology but rooted together in song.

Still, something has struck me in writing this thesis. While queer songs may reach out to other queer people and stitch together a genealogy for those people whose queerness cannot be located in their own families, and who are unable to articulate and make sense of their own queer ways of being and loving, these songs extend beyond the boundaries of queer and trans\*. Songs have the capacity to reach, penetrate, and bond together anybody—*any body, queer or otherwise*—who is open to connection with others through music. Listening to, composing and performing music is a bodily endeavour; without the body, none of us can understand and "do" music. Humans understand and experience the world corporeally; whether we observe our children playing in a park, smell the sharp perfume of cedar trees when we walk in a west coast forest, feel the warmth of a lover's arms around us, listen to the melodic piano of Lifschitz' "Etude in E Major, Opus 10, No. 3," or taste the rain on our lips during an autumn downpour, we come to know the world and ourselves in it through the body. But it is also through these

experiences, this living—as corporeal as it is—that we also come to know something of the spirit, a spirit that is connected to all things.

I have a desire to be recognized and understood, not just by those around me who comprise my queer kin, but by the collective body. So too, I desire to belong to the vast expansiveness of the world within which we exist, where “‘the world’ is not a singular ‘thing,’ but instead a vast array of complex, subjective entities with whom we *all* are in relationship” (Timmerman, 2013, p.5, emphasis in original). My emphasis on lineaging and the salience of relationality is also an important part of Indigenous cultures, with some using the phrase “all my relations” to signal the impossibility of “the self in isolation” and to acknowledge the infinite ways in which we are connected (see for example, International Council of Thirteen Grandmothers, n.d.). Bodily practices like listening, songwriting and singing, bring me into connection with myself, the collective body, and the world. Indeed, it is through these embodied musical practices and the corporeal mobility of songs that I have come to know and make sense of myself, my relations and my place on the earth. These kinships with all living things comprise a lineage that cannot be accounted for simply through blood, biology, or marriage. It is because of and through music that this lineage is queer.

### **Coming Home: Crying Holy**

*One cool September morning, I woke up in a campground called the Gold Mountain RV Park which is located on the south side of the Crowsnest Highway, overlooking the Similkameen River, just a few minutes west of a tiny town called Hedley, BC. I was with two singer-songwriter friends of mine and we had just begun a six-week tour that would take us all the way from*

*Vancouver to Ottawa, and back. The owners of the campground had put us up in a large rental suite with a kitchenette above their office.*

*That morning, I needed to have a few moments to myself before we packed up our rental car and headed to our next destination. So, I put on my hiking shoes, and quietly closed the door of the rental suite behind me, leaving my tour mates sleeping soundly inside. I knew where I wanted to go. Up the mountain across the road, I could see an outcropping of rock that beckoned me. I crossed the empty highway as the morning sunlight began to slide down the side of the mountain ahead of me. As I began my ascent, the yellow, coarse grasses brushed against my calves and I was met with that sweet, familiar scent of Ponderosa pines, dry sagebrush, and yarrow that that infused the parched September air. The incline slowly steepened as I walked, and my legs continued carrying me skyward. My lungs began to work harder to take in air and I could feel my heart waking up from its resting place in my chest, beating faster as I went up, up, up. Finally, I came to the base of the rock outcrop and, placing my hands on the rough, lichened boulders, I scrambled to the top of the rocks that jutted out over the valley. I surveyed the land that surrounded me. I could see the Crownsnest Highway snaking through the valley below, and the campground from where I had begun my trek. Treed with pines, the mountains rose behind the campground, and the blue ribbon of the Similkameen River wove in and out of the forest along the valley bottom. As always when I was up in these places, where the air seemed cleaner, my head felt clearer and my heart, more expansive.*

*At that moment, I felt compelled to look down at my feet. There, on a small grassy patch between the rocks, lay part of a leg bone from a deer. It was clean and bleached white from the sun, and hollow where the marrow had once been. As I stooped over to inspect it further, I could see thousands of tiny holes near the porous end by the joint, and fine cracks running along the*

*length of the bone. I reached down to pick it up and what happened next is something I will never forget. As I stood up and held the bone in my hand, the wind picked up and I was instantly transported to another time and place. The veils between the worlds became transparent and there I was, running across a wide, open meadow with a herd of animals. The sun streamed down on my back and my long hair flowed out behind me as I ran barefoot, strong, and unencumbered. The thunderous noise of hooves filled my ears and clouds of dust rose as the animals and I stampeded across a sweeping plain. As I ran, I had the unmistakable feeling that I had been there before, that my soul inhabited that body many, many years ago. This woman was me, and I was she. Suddenly, everything in my current life and the lifetimes I had lived previously, coalesced in those brief moments: all of the traumatic experiences I had had, and unhealthy choices I had made; all of the shame and confusion I had felt about who I was, along with the rage, the grief, the joy, the laughter; all of my writing, guitar-playing, and singing; each person I had met and become acquainted with—whether intimately, intensely or briefly; and all of the times when I wondered how I would make it home to myself had led me to this moment. All of the experiences and accomplishments in my life thus far turned me towards a life in music and oriented me to this moment. With a precision that I cannot describe, it all became clear; my whole life finally made sense in those brief moments. I had found my way to this time and place through music, with songs as my “homing devices”—songs that had forged for me a path, leading me towards others who shared experiences similar to me, and songs that helped me find my way in this world.*

*I released the bone from my hands. I dropped down to my knees, and placing my palms on the ground, I wept. I finally understood, deep in my body, that living a musical life was what I was supposed to be doing. As this knowing coursed through my veins, I felt a deep, indescribable*

*connection to others and to myself through time and space, and through song. I had finally arrived at my destination: I had come home to myself, and I had found a home in the world and with other people through music, even with those who lived across the country.*

*It is so difficult to describe this experience in words because it was not an earthly experience, even though it felt entirely embodied. I felt my body running across the plain and the wind in my hair; I heard the thunderous hooves in my ears. All I know is that my physical reality cracked open that day, and my soul revealed a memory of someone I had once been—a woman who was strong and powerful, wise and sure, a woman who loved women—and someone who I am now, as I write and sing. Language cannot always name things of the spirit, it seems. But perhaps, when paired with music, it comes close.*

### **Crying Holy**

She came to me in an autumn field  
Somewhere west of here  
At my feet, she laid a bone down  
Old and bleached, on the dusty ground

I picked it up and held it close  
Crows singing, Buffalo thunder ringing out  
Then I was running with the herd  
Along the great divide between two worlds

### **Chorus**

I don't know about the whole  
But I know tears and bones  
And all my broken pieces  
And begging for mercy  
I'm down on my knees  
Crying holy

I had my finger on some kind of trigger  
When I was young  
I would wake up, wondering how I got there  
And how I would make it home

And I never wanted to do what they wanted me to  
I just didn't know any other way  
And I didn't want to be good  
It was just a survival thing

**Chorus**

I don't know about the whole  
But I know tears and bones  
And all my broken pieces  
And begging for mercy  
I'm down on my knees  
Crying holy

I was never meant to  
Live in the terrified shadows  
Of all the tired and unrealized lives  
Of the people along my bloodline

And it's good to recognize  
All those hard places from where we come  
We've got to see beyond the horizon  
And look possibility in the eye

And when I'm long dead and gone  
All those Crows and those thundering Buffalo  
Will come rest on top this place  
And she'll come back and lay down my bones

**Chorus**

I don't know about the whole  
But I know tears and bones  
And all my broken pieces  
And begging for mercy  
I'm down on my knees  
Crying holy

Crying holy



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