

After the 49: Pulse's Performative Afterlife

by

Michael Tristano Jr.

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Graduate Supervisory Committee:

Daniel Brouwer, Chair
Marlon Bailey
Marivel Danielson
Benny LeMaster

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ABSTRACT

On June 12, 2016, Omar Mateen entered Pulse Nightclub in Orlando, FL and shot and murdered 49 people and wounded over 50 more. At the time, it was the deadliest mass shooting ever to occur on U.S. soil. That particular evening, Pulse, a queer nightclub, was hosting a “Latin Night,” which resulted in over 90 percent of the victims being Latinx in descent and many that identified as Afro-Latinx or Black. Essentially, Pulse is the most lethal act of violence against queer and trans bodies of color in this country. Pulse reminds queer and trans people of color of the conditions of the world that position Brown and Black queer and trans death as mundane. That is to say, the lives of trans and queer bodies of color are lived in close proximity to death. And yet, Pulse was anything but mundane. In every practical sense, it was a fantastical event of radical violence. The tension between these and the implications found within is what this project seeks to engage. Utilizing critical/performance-based qualitative methods and data derived from the queer and trans of color communities in Phoenix, AZ, this project investigates the performative afterlife of Pulse. I apply and name the term performative afterlife to suggest that the events at Pulse are connected to material conditions and consequences that get performed by and through queer and trans bodies of color. Interlocutors share the afterlife is performed within the context of ubiquitous whiteness found in Phoenix, often manifesting as a survival mechanism. Additionally, many interlocutors express the mundane threat of violence everyday has prevented a thorough engagement of what it means to live in a world after the events at Pulse nightclub have occurred. Ultimately, the performative afterlife of Pulse gets performed by queer and trans bodies of color in Phoenix through a co-performance between one another. Much

like the dancing that occurred at Pulse, the performative afterlife is a performance that moves the world towards queer or color futures not yet here.

DEDICATION

To the ones we loved in Orlando.

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CHAPTER 1

IN DEFENSE OF LATIN NIGHT AT THE QUEER BAR

It is March 8 of 2019. I sit in silence, draped by shadows, in my apartment. The weight and unknown of today renders me immovable. Instead of the mundane background noise of television that I have grown accustomed to, I feel frozen to begin this ritual. Indeed, this was not a routine day. I just spent a month going through the bureaucracy of the Institutional Review Board (IRB), making revisions to informed consent forms and interview guides to be sure that my dissertation research met academic standards for ethical research. Facing revision after revision for the IRB, I find myself asking: *how could I ever ethically ask queer and/or trans folks to talk about their trauma?* That is, I know where Pulse sits in my own body, I know the pain it was in on June 12, 2016. I know the anger of watching the coverage erasing the intersections of the people who were lost. And I know the despair of hearing the absence of queer and/or trans voices of color in the wake of the shooting. I find myself asking: how do I show the most care for the queer and/or folks in Phoenix who choose to share with me their own stories? I look for a script in my mind: When was the last time I felt care with another queer person of color? That is, when did I feel cared for by another queer or trans person of color and when did I care for another? When was the last time care sparked from our bodies and traversed through moments of sorrow, joy, and love? When did we last dance? After all that's what Pulse was; a place to care.

All of these questions are on my mind as I watch the clock move closer to 5:00pm. March 8 is the day I do my first interview, March 8 is the day I have to treat interlocutors ethically, according to the IRB; March 8 is the day I have to show them the

most care, according to me. As I sit in frozen in my apartment, I ponder how to practice the best care I am capable of. In doing so, my body is transported back to the feelings that animated June 12, 2016 felt like. My Brown¹ queer body crying alone in a hotel room in Salt Lake City, Utah, USA watching the initial coverage:

“Orlando Gunman Attacks Gay Nightclub, Leaving 50 Dead” (Alveraz & Pérez-Peña, 2016)

“Orlando Shooting: 49 Killed, Shooter Pledged ISIS Allegiance” (Fantz, Karimi, & McLaughlin, 2016)

“The World Reacts to Mass Shooting in Orlando” (Bearak, 2016)

My mind moves quickly between June 12, 2016 and Thursday night of this past week where at a local queer bar in Phoenix, a white drag queen pulls my Brown queer body on stage to participate in an amateur twerking competition. A movement my body definitely does not hone. The same night and bar where I mingle(d) with and cruise(d) anonymous bodies—queer and otherwise. My thoughts move quickly bouncing between dates, times, locations, and affects because, for me, Pulse is wrapped up and betwixt so many moments of the last three years. Moments of care—moments of despair.

It is at 8:15am on a Monday. I am smack in the middle of my ritualistic Monday-Morning-Existential-Dread when an unexpected yellow notification pings up on my phone.

¹ Throughout this dissertation, I will be capitalizing Black and Brown to decenter whiteness

“Another bot on Grindr,” I mumble to myself. I roll my eyes and look down at my phone screen. An unexpected smile appears on my face.

It’s from the person I have been messaging the last few days. They ask me if I am free this morning to come over. I reexamine our past messages to remember how drawn I am to them. My smile grows.

I pause. I look around at the few people who surround me in the coffee shop I am sitting in, most of them working on their laptops, most of them Young White Working Professionals, most of them men, wearing wedding rings which prompts me to wonder; *Can any these people imagine two Brown queers are planning to fuck at this time in morning?*” The impossibility of that thought being in anyone’s mind makes my smile increase once again and I can feel my excitement begin to grow as they send their address. I am already out the door.

I reach the apartment of a person I have yet to meet, in person, and ring the buzzer. Its chilly this morning. The air sets a tone for a rewarding encounter as I thrive at any task in the cool weather; sex is no different. They answer the door and greet me.

“Hello” they say shyly.

“Greetings!” I offer back quickly and excitedly to them. They turn and gesture to follow them without any words. Was I too enthusiastic? I feel awkward.

I notice their small but buff stature immediately—I am drawn to them and their body, I watch them move as they lead me up the stairs. I am tempted to grab them right then, but I wait. I let the anticipation build.

As we settle into their room, I walk across to the far end and I place my bag down next to theirs. I suddenly become very aware of my hands and I feel anxious about where

to put them and slide them into my pockets. I wonder if they reciprocate the desire I feel for their Brown queer body; do they too see themselves reflected back at them? The familiar beat of Lizzo's "Cuz I Love You" begins to play. I know all of the lyrics. Every single one. I mouth the Lizzonian poetry and my attention is drawn to them, with their phone in their hand, as they look towards me with a soft smile. My hands start to sweat deep inside my pockets. I am nervous. Without a word they walk over and wrap their hands around my waist. I look down to see their head against my chest, eyes looking up

"Can I kiss you?" they ask nervously.

I nod and we move slowly into each other. I place my hand on their chest and gently run it down to their waist where I pull their hip closer to me. They grab the back of my neck and pull my head close to theirs. It is a dance. I breath and take them in deeply and they do the same to me. We tug on each other's clothes but hang on to one another like the world might pry us apart at any moment. Sparks of intimacy fly between us as we find comfort in one another this crisp morning; we both slept alone the night before.

On June 12, 2016, Omar Mateen entered Pulse Nightclub in Orlando, FL and shot and murdered 49 people and wounded over 50 more. At the time, it was the deadliest mass shooting to have occurred on U.S. soil. That particular evening, Pulse, a queer nightclub, was hosting "Latin Night," which resulted in over 90 percent of the victims being Latinx in descent and many who identified as Afro-Latinx or Black. The 49 murdered victims in addition to the many wounded people, represent the deadliest incident of violence against queer and/or people in the history of the United States.

Essentially, Pulse is the most lethal act of violence against queer and/or bodies of color in this country.

When I think about the current U.S. political climate, which is not dissimilar to the very context the Pulse nightclub shooting happened in now three years ago, I resonate with Alexander and Weem's (2017) words when they write, "If we weren't living in this moment, I wouldn't believe it" (p. 484). As academics and humans, however, we have a responsibility to respond to the conditions in front of us (Ono, 2009). Even when catastrophes occur; maybe especially when catastrophes occur. Indeed, for those of us within the subdiscipline of critical/cultural communication studies, we have tasked ourselves with responding to issues of politics and power; to understand more complexly how power moves and morphs through the world and to push us towards a more equitable society (Ono, 2009). Thus, when an act of mass violence happens at Pulse night club in Orlando Florida on June 12, 2016, an event that is riddled with complex webs of politics and power, how do we, as critical/cultural communication scholars, respond to it? Rather, how do we make sense of the nonsense after the fact (Goltz, 2017)?

In the three years since the massacre, there are have been two large, concentrated efforts in exploring what Pulse means for scholars, teachers, activists, and humans. In 2016 and 2017, respectively, *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking* and *Qualitative Inquiry* published special issues dedicated to and engaging the events at Pulse nightclub. While the scholars that fill the pages of both issues come from a variety of disciplines, all of them are centrally concerned with power and politics, inside and outside of the academy, in the wake of the Pulse massacre. Thus, making them all aligned with a critical/cultural communication approach to scholarship. Indeed, many of the scholars

included in each issue are those who come from the discipline of communication. While there is plethora of perspectives and different lines of thought scribed into the pages of each special issue, this dissertation project seeks to join the conversation led by these scholars in three ways.

First, Calafell (2017) puts it succinctly when she states:

You are not Orlando.

Fucking and fetishizing doesn't make you an ally.

Sit down.

Move aside.

AND listen to BROWN QUEER bodies (p. 512, emphasis original)

Calafell's poetic and poignant words demonstrate the palpability of whiteness and heteronormativity that is found in academic spaces, generally, in communication studies, specifically, and in public discourse surrounding Pulse, most immediately. Edmonds (2017) furthers, "We white gays have continued to push people out of gay spaces to protect our white privilege" (p. 523) Edmonds demands that our personal, political, and academic discussions surrounding Pulse must center the lived experiences and voices of queer and/or trans bodies of color to avoid flattening the complexity of this radical act of violence. In short, we must begin to center and listen to the people who were most affected by the events that occurred at Pulse nightclub June 12, 2016.

Second, Alexander and Weems (2017) write urgently about the need for performative and poetic responses to Pulse. The authors go on to explain, poetry and performative writing are "powerful methods/modes of articulating the human spirit and

as acts of protest” (p. 483). Further, poetry and performance honors and reflects what the space of Pulse enabled bodies to do. Dance. Flow. Imagine. Indeed, a survey of the plethora of pages of the two special issues will reveal poetry, personal narrative, auto-ethnography, letters, prayers, pictures, and links to filmed performances. Fawaz (2016), for example, uses the metaphor of a dance floor to conceptualize a post-Pulse pedagogy. He theorizes the classroom as a dancehall that explores difference through theory and the body and concludes it is a concrete step that leads students to look out at a dance floor in a club, and join in. In this way, affect must be centered in scholarship about pulse.

Third, Pérez (2016) writes powerfully about the erasure of, not only, the intersectional nature of the identities of those at the club but also of the complex context within which Pulse occurred. I quote Pérez at length to demonstrate her poignant prose:

#WeAreOrlando. I feel shame. I lose my voice. I follow Nicole Fleetwood’s reading of Trayvon Martin. I think, no. We are not Orlando. We are alive. We know no such horror. Who, in fact, are “we?” #SayTheirNames. I cannot reconcile the names and faces, those names and faces in the Brady Bunch mug shot line ups with the genesis of that particular hashtag. Are queer publics saying their names appropriating yet another site of Black subjectivity? Of murdered Black women? Brazen in coalition, we risk appropriation. I want these stories and these bodies to be in relation, their specificity, their intersections, their collective resistances. I want a sustained process of reflection on the queer worldmaking publics of belongings, of erasures, those publics that are constituted and hoped for, those queer worldmaking publics through which and to whom I meander,

refuse, constitute, and otherwise belong, those queer worldmaking publics that can and must be made and remade. I also want more. (p. 128).

Pérez notes it is necessary to (1) work against the erasure of intersectional identities and (2) to include the complex context in which Pulse occurred. Pérez utilizes the repeated phrase “I also want more” to perform *more* of the urgency/pain/fleetingness of wanting more from our discourse about Pulse.

I agree. I also want more.

Following the lead of the scholars above, this dissertation (1) centers the voices and experiences of queer and/or trans bodies color in Phoenix, Arizona, (2) responds to the need for affective responses and expressions about Pulse, and (3) avoids the erasure of intersectional complexity and context of Pulse.

In this introductory chapter, I introduce the foundational material needed for this dissertation project. More specifically, I provide context for the events that occurred at Pulse nightclub on June 12, 2016. Additionally, I detail the meta-goal of this dissertation to decenter whiteness in research and re-center voices of queer and/or trans people of color. Similarly, I will demonstrate the necessity for a performative approach to engaging with the Pulse shooting. Finally, I will lean into the complexity required for advancing knowledge and illuminating (hidden) structures of power.

Introduction to Context and Purpose of Research

I am sitting in my advanced methods class as a doctoral student uncomfortably—feeling exposed and awkward because I have not yet felt a place for me here. The class is being taught by a Very Important Professor in my department. It is week seven of the semester and I have been assigned to lead a discussion for the first half of class on the

sub-topic entitled “personal narrative, performance, and autoethnography.” Despite the fact each of these words refer to a different concept found under the umbrella of performance studies, they are all assigned for one half of a seminar period—the only time we cover any type of performance methodologies, broadly defined. The articles that we are reading for this session are penned by white performance scholars in the field of communication. I wish for a foundation that my body can recognize. I feel out of place. Not only are the methodologies I want to engage as a scholar decentered for normative qualitative methodologies, their only presence simultaneously re-centers whiteness. Allen, Mark, and Refugia Olivias (1999) note the pain of not seeing yourself reflected in academic spaces; in theories, in method, or in research. They liken the marginalization and the simultaneous effects of being an “other” in the academy, to the complexity of their tears. The literal manifestation of not finding yourself on the pages of texts nor in the bodies surrounding you makes the eyes swell with tears. And the weight of knowing that clinging to whiteness is a proven trajectory towards a successful academic career infuses those tears with layers of emotions. They are complex.

I am sitting in my methods class and I feel the weight of my complex tears rush towards the front of my eyes. What would it feel like to decenter whiteness in research, I wonder? Here, I use whiteness to refer to a “mythical” normative center of racialization (Lorde, 2007). Further, Carrillo Rowe and Malholtra (2007) detail that bodies of color are expected to perform in accordance white whiteness’ normative scripts or risked being disciplined. In this way, whiteness is linked to both performative ways of being and mundane communication practices (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995) in order to become a primary power structure, organizing systems on the micro, meso, and macro level. The

structure of whiteness is palpable in the discipline of communication studies (Chakravartty, Kuo, Grubbs, & McIlwain, 2018). The structure of whiteness is palpable in the academy writ large (Corrigan & Vats, 2020) The structure of whiteness is also palpable in this classroom.

I attempt to transport myself to a place where I do not feel the weight of whiteness on my body. The club. Or an enduring 8am anonymous hookup with another queer Brown body. Could research feel like that? It seems like an impossible future to ask for.

But “I also want more” (Pérez, p. 128).

[Melancholia] is a mechanism that helps us (re)construct identity and take our dead with us to the various battles we must wage in their names—and in our names (Muñoz, 1999, p. 74).

In the wake of the Pulse massacre, public debates broke out about gun control, mental health, and Mateen’s connection to ISIS. Those who did not survive were most often reported on as club goers, Hispanic, Latino, and attendees. And while Pulse was recognized by the mainstream media as a queer club, it was difficult to find coverage of the event that ascribed queer identities to those at the club—Pulse was, in the mediated imagination, a queer night club with no queer patrons. Effectively, from the moment the act was complete, the public understanding of Pulse erased the intersections of those who lost their lives, those who were wounded, and even those who survived.

However, today the public’s memory of Pulse has since shifted. As noted previously, the Pulse massacre no longer carries the distinction of the deadliest mass shooting in the United States. On October 1, 2017, Stephen Paddock fired more than 1000

rounds from his suite in Las Vegas, NV killing 58 and wounding over 800 more people in attendance at the Route 91 Harvest Music Festival. And while the Las Vegas shooting is now the deadliest mass shooting in our history, it is certainly not the only mass shooting since Pulse. Stoneman Douglas; Santa Fe; El Paso. To name a few. In our current socio-political climate, it is not difficult to situate Pulse into a long and miserable list of mass shootings in the U.S.

Still, if you were to ask any queer or trans person of color where they were when they first heard the news of Pulse, each and everyone one of us can detail exactly where we were, what we were doing, and who we clung to; who we checked on; who we cried on. For us, the effects of Pulse do not start or end at gun control or mental health. Rather, Pulse reminds us of the conditions of the world that position Brown and Black queer and/or trans death as mundane. To repeat Alexander and Weems (2017), “if we weren’t living in this moment, I wouldn’t believe it.” That is to say, the lives of queer and/or trans bodies of color are lived in close proximity to death (Chambers-Letson, 2018). And yet, Pulse was anything but mundane. In every practical sense, it was a fantastical event of radical violence. The tension between the mundane and the fantastical, and the implications found within it is what this project works through.

This dissertation project responds directly to what Muñoz (1999) suggests in the quotation that opens this subsection: *[Melancholia] is a mechanism that helps us (re)construct identity and take our dead with us to the various battles we must wage in their names—and in our names* (p. 74). In light of Pulse, how do queer and trans people of color continue to wage on in the name of the 49 that were lost? Pulse, of course, was a spot of queer nightlife. While there are several scholarly conversations this project would

like to speak with, there is one in particular that should be noted presently. Much of the scholarship that engages queer and/or trans nightlife, often as a site of queer worldmaking, is confined to particular geographies. This project investigates how an event at one particular site of queer nightlife, in this case Orlando, ripples out into a queer and trans community of color found in a different geographic location, specifically the queer and trans community of color in Phoenix Arizona. As Andrade and Gutierrez-Perez (2017) write, “what happened at Pulse Orlando was not us but it was us” (p. 503). They write about a “radical interconnectedness” (p. 503) queer and trans folk of color feel to the bodies that were lost at Pulse. Andrade and Gutierrez-Perez posit: the bodies lost are in our pulse. Specifically, I investigate the performative afterlife of Pulse. I use the term performative afterlife to suggest that the events at Pulse are connected to material conditions and consequences that get performed by and through queer and trans bodies of color. In this way, this project is inherently concerned with the survival, agency, and resistance of queer and trans people of color lives in the wake of Pulse.

Our shirts slip off simultaneously as we fall onto their bed. Tucked together in a corner, I carefully trace a design into their chest as they cradle me, comparing the similarities and differences of our olive skin. I move quickly from their chest to their neck and gnaw—bite—down hard but gently. They respond swiftly with a large moan of pleasure and dig their fingers into my bare back. I use my tongue to guide me down to their nipples and tease each one. For a moment they lay back and take in the sensation and then without warning shove my right shoulder so hard I fall from on top of them onto my side. They quickly flip me all the way onto my back and pin my arms down above my

head and bury themselves deep into my chest. I sigh deeply as they begin exploring my pierced flesh. Eventually I drag their face up to mine

“Kiss me.” I say through my breath.

It is a long deep kiss. One that sparks a constellation of an imagined life:

i was going to see you and forget you

and only remember you in my hips

and how my smile came easier than clenching my teeth eventually

and how I finally learned whatever it is i still haven't learned yet

i was going to hear you laugh and now know why

and not care...

but now i am pulse

and you

are flame (Gumbs, 2016, p. 98, emphasis original).

I realize that we are no longer making out. My head resting on their breast plate, I trace the outline of their belly button and they giggle.

“I love how slow you take it,” they coo.

I smile but realize my face is not visible to them so I purr gently to indicate, “It makes the experience better, we get to sit in the erotic, to listen to our bodies when they may know the most.”

I am not naïve enough to want to stay in this moment forever; instead, I am determined to capture the ephemerality in my body. To take it with me for another day,

for a day when the invisibility of whiteness renders our existence moot. Or more accurately, for a day whiteness renders us non-existent. When the weight of the violence that plagues our communities become too much of us to bear alone.

We “also want more” (Pérez, p. 128).

Ethnic and performance studies scholar, Juana María Rodríguez (2016) iterates the importance of context for those who engage with Pulse, discursively or otherwise. She first notes, contrary to popular opinion, gay bars have never really been a safe place; they are more aptly places of bravery, resilience, and activism. Further, a night like Latin night exists because of the history of racial profiling and discrimination that gay bars often perform, both from patrons and agents of the state. Rivera-Severa (2014) agrees and posits that for a trans or queer person of color to leave the home to get to a club on a Saturday night can threaten their body; it is in and of itself an act of bravery. Pierce (2016), echoes this when he writes, “our queer breath is a revolutionary act” (p. 132). However, Chávez (2016) reminds us that the mainstream media, holistically, erased the context for what Pulse was in their reporting.

In this way, writers and scholars (Calafell, 2017; Chávez, 2016; Johnson, 2017, Pérez, 2016; Rodríguez, 2016) urge us to remember that the events that occurred at were not just “a gay bar.” Pulse was hosting a Latin night, specifically; playing the Latin beats and rhythms often excluded from (white) queer spaces and welcomed the Brown and Black bodies that danced with them. Gutiérrez et. al (2018) further note the geography of Florida is also particularly important for several different reasons. The complicated history of the Latinx, Afro-Latinx, and Afro-Caribbean diasporas coalesce in Florida. In

other words, the Brown and Black bodies that were disproportionately affected in the events at Pulse, their families, and their kin, were not a monolith shade of Brown; their ethnic and racial histories are as nuanced and unique as the many different types of Latin music. Salsa. Merengue. Cumbia. Further, the racialized history of violence in Florida is deep; tracing back to the Seminole Wars and with Trayvon Martin still at the forefront of our memories. In short, it was Latin night, at a gay bar, in Florida. The intersections, complications, and contradictions are what scholars, activists, and writes should be focused on. In response to these calls and reminders, this dissertation seeks to simultaneously de-center the whiteness surrounding Pulse and to re-center complexity and nuance more reflective of the bodies who were at the club that night.

I got another email from my department listserv about a blood drive on campus. In the aftermath of Pulse, there was an urgent need for blood. Most queer men remained (and still remain) legally barred from donating (Stern, 2016).

I text a friend to meet at the bar later where I will donate my queer money instead of my queer blood.

“I also want more” (Pérez, p. 128).

I am sitting in my methods course; I take a deep breath and decide to quickly push my tears far back into my head and away from my mind’s eye and I prepare to perform the discussion that I have been assigned. Not only because it is a requirement to pass the course, but more so to prove myself to the Very Important Professor, whose influence and networking in my home discipline reach far. To verify that I am indeed well versed

in methodologies that I claim. To gain access to the resources the Very Important Professor can give me. I willingly perform a particular type of academic whiteness in this moment not only for survival but in order to advance my own personal and professional goals. I have prepared a short activity, informed by the literature provided to us, to engage both the Very Important Professor and mostly white students that populate my class. I hope I am rewarded for my work.

I willingly contribute to the whiteness that plagues our academic spaces in this moment and in far too many other moments in my time as a graduate student. I am sure I will again. Calafell (2007) writes about the importance of writing stories from our bodies that show how we are both marginalized and complicit in the systems of power that are the subject of our critique. To this end, it is important to define power and how it is used in this dissertation project. My understanding of power is informed by a women of color feminisms. In this way, I understand power as both fluid and material (May, 2016). Power is material in that it creates conditions of oppression that results in less livable lives for those who experience the effects of marginalization. Power is fluid in that each person experiences different privileges and disadvantages determined by the context of which they find themselves. These privileges and disadvantages ebb and flow as contexts change. Therefore, to mark ourselves as cogs of the system, as both critic and participant—to acknowledge the fluid and material nature of power—allows us to push towards more nuanced and not-yet-asked questions in our personal and academic lives. Years ago, sitting in my methods class, both feeling the effects of whiteness and co-participating to reify it as the center, is part of the impetus of this dissertation project. More specifically, I ask, how do we decenter whiteness in research? And further, what

does the result of research that decenters whiteness look like? Feel like? Sound like? This dissertation locates itself as a starting place to answer these questions.

A starting place to “also want more” (Pérez, p. 128).

I open this dissertation with these stories in a bricolage form to demonstrate the complexity and slipperiness of researching and living after the events at Pulse nightclub on June 12, 2016. Quesada (2016) furthers that even the use of language can flatten or convolute the complexity of what the event at Pulse was. He writes specifically about translating coverage of the Pulse massacre between English and Spanish presents a unique but necessary challenge for those who want to report on and discuss the event with the bodies that it most deeply affect(s/ed). I agree and further, that to academicize the event will certainly flatten parts of the event but yet is a necessary endeavor to fully realize the magnitude and deep lasting impacts of the massacre. At the same time, however, an academic approach cannot and should not be the only way we continue to discuss Pulse. Which is one reason this project seeks to speak to both academic and community audiences.

I came to this project after Pulse quite literally snuck up on me in a particular moment sitting in the graduate student lounge of my department. I was reading an article about trauma in the Black community since the 2016 election. My belly seemed to do a summersault as I scrolled to sees the large, iconic Black and white ‘P’ from outside the club in Florida.

My body was filled with a plethora of emotion. Grief. Love. Surprise. Loss. Joy. In that moment, I identified how the events on June 12, 2016 literally live as an afterlife

in my own body. McCormack (2010) details the nature of affective afterlives through material remains. Through an object-oriented ontology, he argues that objects can serve as a reminder of events and people who are no longer with us. Connection between the body and object results in a felt sense through the body. In other words, the materiality of the object creates the conditions for the affective afterlives. Frers (2013) concurs and furthers the absence of a person (a lover, a friend) can result in a felt experience of absence that leads one to engage in utterances to feel the presence of those who are absent. Simply put, the absence we feel from a missing body creates a present absence that aids us in connecting with those who are no longer with us. But in the moment Pulse snuck up on me in the graduate student lounge, there was no object that triggered me, nor did I know any person who died in the club that night in June. And further, it changed my own corporeality that afternoon. It was more than affective; it was performative.

I come to understand performance from the lineage of people of color, queers, and women all of whom come from different disciplinary traditions but consider the body and embodiment as critical to performance (LeMaster, 2018). In this way, performance takes place in both the aesthetic and the everyday (Johnson, 2003; Muñoz, 2009; Rodríguez, 2014); it is an epistemology and an ontology (Calafell, 2007; Johnson & Rivera-Servera, 2016; Moten, 2003); performance evokes experience and experience evokes performance (Conqergood, 2013, Madison & Hamera, 2005; Muñoz, 1999). Central to all of these manifestations of performance is power and agency. For those that occupy difference, performance acknowledges the shifting context of power, how we are constantly in a relationship to a (mythical) normative way of being and provides a way to confront structures of power. Indeed, even when a body has been stripped of everything else, it can

still perform. In this way, I understand performance as a mechanism and manifestation for survival (Chambers-Letson, 2018). And even further, I understand performance as a site of (radical) potentiality (Madison, 1999; Madison, 2012) and a vehicle for worldmaking (Goltz & Zingsheim, 2015).

The events at Pulse effect the way I move through the world both that particular day in the graduate student lounge and on June 12, 2016 and moments found betwixt these iterations. It does so both in the ways that I choose to perform with my body and how performances of my body are interpellated by others. As I propose, the events at Pulse live in and through the body as a performative afterlife. Naturally, as a queer, mixed race person of color, I found myself inquiring: how has Pulse impacted the queer and/or trans of color communities that I care deeply about? Where does Pulse's performative afterlife live in their bodies? How does it change their corporeality? The people, research, and stories found in this document are one attempt to reach towards some of those questions. In this way, they also serve as a memorial and homage to the bodies lost; privileging the Black, Brown, queer, and trans sensibilities they were all intimately familiar with.

This dissertation is my attempt at more.

As I sit in my apartment on March 8 of 2019, I attempt to unfreeze myself. I turn on some music in an attempt to motivate and lift my own spirit before the interview takes place. Lizzo just released a new single called "*Cuz I Love You*." I am really starting to get into it. I want to know all the lyrics. Every single one.

Despite knowing the interlocutor personally by face, name, and spirit, I think to myself that I am thankful that this first interview is over the phone; the anonymity of the phone makes it a bit less daunting, a bit less threatening. The phone rings at 6:08pm, a full hour after the agreed upon start time. For which I am also thankful. We dive into my ethically approved research about Pulse and it is terrifying.

Outline of Dissertation

In this first chapter, I introduced the general context and purpose of this dissertation project. In chapter two, I write through an excursion of theoretical conversations this dissertation enters. It pays particular attention to the minoritarian subject, queer of color night life, and queer relationality and world making. Each of these sections are understood as constituted through and by performance.

I provide a theoretical framework in the second chapter. More specifically, I, first, provide a framework of power, which I understand as always intersectional, and particularly flesh out white supremacy and heteronormativity, which create the everyday and mundane conditions that queer and/or trans bodies of color find themselves in. Second, I review how minoritarian subjectivity manifests within the framework of power provided. Third, I detail how minoritarian subjects create livable lives for themselves and, finally, examine how sites of queer nightlife function as sites of radical queer worldmaking.

Chapter three offers the methodological approach to this dissertation. I offer my orientation to and employment of critical qualitative methods. Additionally, I detail the importance of autoethnographic and performative writing in this project. Finally, I

describe the conditions and demographics of the data collected that was collected for this dissertation.

In chapter four, I offer an analysis of the interviews I conducted with queer and/or trans bodies of color in Phoenix, Arizona. I pay close attention to what is both similar and different in the narratives; I describe the themes that came out of the interviews and use theory to elucidate how power creates material conditions of oppression and then, more specifically, how those conditions are informed by the performative afterlife of Pulse. In order to conduct the analysis, I rely heavily on the literature that I engage with in chapter two.

Finally, in chapter five, I offer a discussion of theoretical and methodological considerations and implications that are born from the results of this research, the staging and performance of chapter five, and an interrogation of the material consequences for queer and/or trans bodies of color. I close with a discussion of shimmering possibilities of research that decenters whiteness and futures on the horizon for queer and/or trans folks of color.

CHAPTER 2

LOCATING THE MINORITARIAN SUBJECT

Sitting in a small seminar hall at a major research university in central Illinois, I prepare to perform on a panel entitled *Politics of Resistance 'Post-Pulse': Resuscitating the Heartbeats of Neglected Queer Bodies and Beings* as part of a large, international academic conference. The panel is noted as a “Spotlight” panel in the conference program, and I am eager to take in how other academics are thinking and writing about Pulse in 2019. Three years feels like a long time, I think to myself. The spotlight designation makes it feel like there might be some groundbreaking work or at the very least sparkly potentialities for the future of research about Pulse. It makes it feel important. Before the panel begins, I read over the panel rationale once more:

More than two years have passed since the tragedy at Pulse Nightclub, the gay cultural space in Orlando, FL where 49 innocents were murdered by a lone gunman. This massacre took a real and material toll on culture and cultural beings. Yet the attention given to Pulse has dwindled to nearly nothing. Questions remain concerning issues of violence, discourse, silence, marginalization, political engagement, just for starters, leading us to ask: what is the sound of Pulse’s heart beat today? In this panel five participants draw on a number of conceptual and methodological approaches to examine one or more of these issues. We represent a diverse range of backgrounds, from doctoral students to senior scholars, and share a commitment to inquiry that generates inclusive understandings of this massacre, and cultural inquiry more generally. This panel will leave plenty of time for discussion with/for those in attendance.

There is potential, I think cheerfully. And yet I feel a flutter in my chest as I recall the context of how the invitation to join this panel was extended to me.

The particular performance I am going over in my mind before the start of the panel, *Embodying the Performative Afterlife of Pulse*, is a co-authored piece with the person who invited me on to the panel. I recall receiving a text from them months earlier in which they shared they have been invited to be on a panel about the Pulse night club shooting and to their knowledge there were no other queer and/or trans people of color currently scheduled to appear. They wanted to mark a particular and necessary politic of ensuring that queer and trans voices of color were a part of this scholarly conversation (Calafell, 2017; Johnson, 2017).

Indeed, as I look around the room my co-author and I are the only self-identified queer and/or trans people of color who are on this panel. The flutter in my chest dies down a bit and the flutter begins to melt into a weight, landing in the pit of my stomach. The absence of a multitude of queer and/or trans voices of color in this room echoes in the place of my body that remembers their voices absent after June 12, 2016. I wonder what most people would say about that absence. Most likely they would say they do not know where to find those voices. They are just not looking in the right places, I think to myself.

After completing our performance that detailed preliminary findings and ideas about this dissertation project, my co-author and I sit and engage with a performance that is presented as an (auto)ethnographic endeavor to explore how one relates (or does not relate) to the physical and spiritual presence of Pulse in Orlando today. In other words, how, when one goes to visit the place where Pulse stood, does one identify (or not) with

it and the people that surround it. I sit there and listen to a scholar talk about his social position as it relates to Pulse; he is a white gay man who is located in Florida. As I mull over his use of Muñoz in his project, my mind drifts, if only for a moment, to be with my own thoughts, until I am immediately pulled back in when the white gay scholar utters, “as a gay man who primarily dates Latin men, I could have been there.”

I stop breathing. I want to stand up, bang my hands on the table, shout, run out of the room, snatch his script out of his hand.

“How dare you? How dare you decide to perform a double gesture that simultaneously homogenizes and fetishizes a group of queer folks of color and (re)centers your own whiteness. You should be ashamed,” I want to spit back at him.

Instead, I ease myself back into breathing and I try to catch a glance of anyone else who might have heard his last sentence. In this moment, I feel the power of whiteness in this academic space. I felt it from the scholar’s body and utterance and now I feel it in my own choice not to say anything. I choose to perform ‘good academic’ rather than face the consequences of deviating from the norm (Carrillo Rowe & Malholtra, 2007).

I stop listening to the performances and I look back at the program with the list of participants for this panel. Three gay white men, two straight Brown women, one straight (non-American) white man, and my co-author and I: two mixed raced queer/trans people of color. I feel and quite literally see the structures of whiteness and heteronormativity that underpin this academic space and conversation. I think back to the subtitle of the panel: *Resuscitating the Heartbeats of Neglected Queer Bodies and Beings*. I make a

quick edit in my mind: ~~*Resuscitating the Heartbeats of Neglected Queer Bodies and Beings.*~~

“I also want more” (Pérez, p. 128).

In this chapter, I outline the theoretical framework that guides this dissertation. To begin, I provide a framework of power, which I understand as always intersectional, and specifically I flesh out white supremacy and heteronormativity, which create the everyday and mundane conditions that queer and/or trans bodies of color find themselves in. Next, I elucidate how minoritarian subjectivity manifests within the framework of power provided. Then, I provide an overview of queer relationality as a tool for livability for queer and/or trans people of color. Finally, I conclude with a description of queer of color nightlife as a site of queer worldmaking; a site where radical imagination is dreamed and created. The chapter ends with the research questions, informed by the literature, that guide this dissertation.

Power

As mentioned in the previous chapter, I understand power to be both fluid and material. In other words, power is material in that it creates real, felt conditions of oppression for bodies and power is fluid as each person’s privileges and disadvantages ebbs and flows dependent on context. In this section, I further develop the definition of power as intersectional. Then, I briefly trace white supremacy and heteronormativity as two types of oppressions that create material consequences for queer and/or trans bodies of color.

Intersectionality

Intersectionality is an analytical tool and political orientation, rooted deeply in the context of women of color feminism (particularly Black feminist thought), that highlights the interlocking nature of structures of power (May, 2015). In this way, intersectionality is not simply a way to dialogue about identities, a common discursive understanding. Rather, intersectionality is an analytical tool that makes visible systems of power, illuminates connections between those systems, breaks us from hegemonic ways of thinking, and provides opportunities to (re)imagine strategies to confront those systems and solve for social inequalities.

To further elaborate onto this definition, I turn to the example of Black feminists. When Black feminists created coalitions, their work was doing two important things. First, Black feminists were using their experiences to explain how systems of power create and maintain gender inequality were not separate from systems of power that produce and uphold racial inequality. Quite literally, Black feminists were using their bodies as proof that these systems intersected, were interconnected, and relational to one another (Combahee River Collective, 1977). This was a different notion from other social movements that placed emphasis on single-issue causes. The feminist movement, for example, held gender above all else, akin to a rally cry of ‘if we fix the issue of gender inequality, then we can move on to another source of oppression.’ Black feminists challenged this popular notion pragmatically showing how it was impossible to focus on gender inequality without addressing issues of race. Second, by challenging the popular assumption of single-issue causes, Black women feminists displayed how the feminist movements and the African American civil rights movement, with seemingly separate goals, were actually attempting to combat the very same overarching systems of power,

what May (2015) calls matrix thinking. Drawing on Lorde's (2007) both/and logic, matrix thinking urges us to move beyond a focus on how structures oppress different bodies that occupy different social locations in different ways—in other words different boxes in the matrix—and privileges thinking about how those inequalities are created by the same framework of structures—the large box that encompasses all the little boxes. Thus, it is here where the epicenter of intersectional thought is found: intersectionality is a tool for to interrogate power structures and provides evidence that these systems of power are always interlocked with and relational to one another.

Importantly, emphasizing power's multiple domains and drawing on both/and logic, intersectionality challenges normative ways of thinking about domination and resistance. Attending to privilege and oppression as relational, intersectionality highlights within-group differences and inequalities, not just between group variances. Indeed, this highlights how we all might participate in forms of domination and harm even while we fight structures of power and pursue justice. In this way, intersectional approaches to social justice aim to account for multiple forms of power concurrently instead of focusing on single-issue causes. Feminists of color emphasized a coalitional approach to liberation, practicing and promoting a feminism built on coalitional politics that resisted either or logics, or what Lorde (2007) called divide and conquer thinking. Intersectionality, then, and its radical roots, calls for dismantling systematic oppression; its temporal orientations are both pragmatically in the here and now and idealistically in (re)imagined utopian futures not yet realized. Finally, intersectionality embraces complexity. At various times, a theory of intersectionality can feel contradictory and be a source of frustration for scholars, activists, and educators (Collins & Bilge, 2016). Yet,

what women of color feminists so eloquently point out is that our world is complex; it does not function neatly or linearly, and it is challenging to think about. To shy away from solutions that are also complex and difficult to think about would be to ignore the very complexity that continues to perpetuate systems of power and oppression. With an intersectional understanding of power, then, I turn to two forms of oppression that trans and queer bodies of color face in their daily lives: white supremacy and heteronormativity.

White Supremacy

Within the geo-political landscape of the United States, it is necessary to provide a brief history of the project of race to understand the power structure and ideology of white supremacy. Broadly,

White supremacy refers to the attitudes, ideologies, and policies associated with the rise of blatant forms of white or European dominance over “nonwhite” populations. In other words, it involves making invidious distinctions of socially crucial kind that are based primarily, if not exclusively, on physical characteristics and ancestry (Fredrickson, 1981, p. xi)

With this definition in mind, it is not difficult to conceptualize white supremacy in the United States as the very inception of our country. From the beginning, the founding members of the United States eradicated indigenous people, land, and societies in accordance with their own perceived moral and intellectual superiority (Fanon, 1961; Omi & Winant, 1986). It is not surprising, then, in 1619 the colonies that would become the United States captured, brutalized, and transported the first of millions of Africans to the shores of the America to usher in an era of chattel slavery; the implications, effects,

and material realities of which, particularly for Black bodies, are still very much alive and felt today (Smallwood, 2019). These sweepings acts of colonization furthered by an “American” and white supremacy hegemony, moreover, laid the foundation for the system of capitalism still present in the United States today. Fanon (1961) furthers, “the colonist derives his validity, i.e., his wealth, from the colonial system” (p. 2). Here, Fanon details how white superiority/morality and capital, and in turn access to resources, are inextricably linked. White supremacy, colonization, and chattel slavery were not happenstance. They were meticulous choices made to ensure the legacy and future of white people.

The project of race, generally, and white supremacy, specifically, has been made possible by the active actor of the state (Glenn, 2002). As more bodies began to migrate to the United States, those that were considered white and non-white have changed (Glenn, 2015). Central to this project was who was afforded access to citizenship. For instance, when the United States was first founded citizenship was granted to white, protestant men, which more specifically referred to men who came from Western Europe. Men from Italy, for example, were excluded from this definition initially (Glenn, 2002). However, in a series of strategic moves to uphold white supremacy, and in the midst of a myriad of bodies migrating from all corners of the world, more men, like men from Italy, were usurped into the definition of white bodies. This was not in service of giving citizenship to all who desired it; rather it was strategic maneuvering by the state that reified those with a white phenotype as the ideal citizen and barred other types of bodies from accessing citizenship. This is an important point to show how the project of race is based in social construction, rather than rooted in biology. Yet, despite normative racial

categories being the product of strategic social construction, the racial social position one occupies still carries material consequences (Omi & Winant, 1986).

White supremacy, in this way, is an organizing structure and process of domination that makes (white) racial privilege and whiteness possible. Further, white supremacy is a process, one always in flux, in order to secure privileges for those who benefit from it (Lorde, 2017). James Baldwin (1962) describes white supremacy's vastness as an "indifferent fortress," one that requires great stamina and cunning to face head on every day. Indeed, the ubiquity and institutionalized fortress of white supremacy become all too salient in our current geo-political climate as institutions seeped in it grant and deny privileges to bodies based on perceived categories of race. The effects can be felt on individual and systematic levels, particularly by those who do not benefit from white privilege. In short, white supremacy, rooted in a colonial past, upholds current forms of institutional racism and galvanizes individuals to commit discriminatory and violent acts in its name.

Zeus Leonardo (2004) argues that white supremacy and whiteness, while different, are inexplicitly linked together. Leonardo argues the conditions of contemporary white supremacy are what make white privilege possible. Leonardo argues "race is an organizing principle that cuts across class, gender, and other imaginable social identities" (p. 140). George Lipsitz (2009) furthers that white supremacy can be seen in the weakness of civil rights laws, the racial dimensions of the economy, and the effects of environmental racism, for example. The embedded and structural nature of white supremacy in the contemporary United States is not an accident. Lipsitz details how

meticulously white supremacy has seeped into our modern laws of the land, nodding back to when chattel slavery was *the* law of the land.

Indeed, Leonardo and Lipsitz's analyses demonstrates the need for intersectional orientations towards white supremacy. The systems (legal, economic, etc.) that uphold white supremacy intersection with social locations (gender, sexuality, etc.) so tightly, it is a disservice to understand them as independent of one another (May, 2015). The blatant and insidious dangers of white supremacy can be found in the many forms it can take, the institutions it cuts through, and the bodies who are at the mercy of it.

Heteronormativity

Not dissimilar to how white supremacy operates, heteronormativity is a structure of organizing and domination that positions heterosexuality as natural, normal, unquestioned, and unproblematized. Sexuality has been a privileged site of social organization, partly because of the way it connects the individual to the social (Foucault, 1978). Within a Western context, sexuality is often organized around a heterosexual/homosexual binary, with heterosexuality being the unquestioned, privileged class. In short, heterosexuality is seen as a stable and master category. However, Sedgwick (1990) further elaborates,

First, [homosexuality] is not symmetrical with but subordinated to [heterosexuality]; but, second, the ontologically valorized [heterosexuality] actually depends for its meaning on the simultaneous subsumption and exclusion of [homosexuality]; hence, third, the question of priority between the supposed central and the supposed marginal category of each dyad is irresolvably unstable,

an instability caused by the fact that [homosexuality] is constituted as at once internal and external to [heterosexuality] (p. 10)

In other words, heterosexuality is a powerful but unstable concept that requires constant repetition for its protection. It is precisely because of heterosexuality's unstable nature, heterosexuality must painstakingly, persistently, and passionately re-center itself and becomes ubiquitous and institutionalized in the micro, meso, and macro levels of our society. The move from an unstable end of a sexual binary to a large system of organization creates the conditions of heteronormativity. Indeed, Gust Yep (2003) that "when the view is that institutionalized heterosexuality constitutes the standard for legitimate, authentic, prescriptive, and ruling social, cultural, and sexual arrangements, it becomes heteronormativity" (p. 13).

Heteronormativity creates dangerous and violent conditions for those who live within its domain, particularly for those who are perceived for living outside of the categorical idea of heterosexuality. It does so by, first, normalizing heterosexuality as the center and, second, despite heteronormativity's ubiquity, it remains largely invisible. As Berlant and Warner (1998) explain heteronormativity refers to:

the institutions, structures of understanding, and practical orientations that make heterosexuality seem not only coherent—that is, organized as a sexuality—but also privileged. Its coherence is always provisional, and its privilege can take several (sometimes contradictory) forms: unmarked as the basic idiom of the personal and the social; or marked as a natural state; or projected as an ideal or moral accomplishment. It consists less of norms that could be summarized as a body of

doctrine than of a sense of rightness produced in contradictory manifestations—often unconscious, immanent to practice or to institutions (p. 548)

In this way, heteronormativity becomes a site of violence for those who are marked as other. Yep (2003) suggest that there are several ways that heteronormativity creates harm for those outside the confines of heterosexuality: self-hatred and internalized homophobia, hate crimes and external homophobia, discursive violence, and institutional violence.

Of course, heteronormativity is always made complicated by different intersections of race, class, and gender, for example. For instance, Shinsuke Eguchi and Hannah Long (2019) write in coalition with one another as queer subjects. Writing from the positions of trans-national femme and fat, respectively, Eguchi and Long trouble the logics of heteronormativity in order to “interrupt existing power relations that structurally constrain the multiple fluidity of queerness across space, time, and history. Shadee Abdi and Bobbi Van Glider (2016) explore the narratives of twelve queer, Iranian-American woman and the complexities of their social locations. Abdi and Van Glider’s work integrates heteronormativity across geographic, generational, racialized and gendered intersections. The brave voices of the woman they interviewed further the need for work that explores the violence of heteronormativity across multiple intersections. With this in mind, the next section details minoritarian subjectivity, particularly as it pertains to queer and/or trans bodies of color.

Minoritarian Subject/Performance

Drawing on theories born of the flesh of women of color feminists, Muñoz (1999) gave us the useful theoretical invention of the minoritarian subject. He specifically credits

Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa's (1981) work *This Bridge Called my Back: Writings of Radical Women of Color* for being some of the first radical women of color feminists to employ identity as a mobilization technique for progressive political thought and action. Writing about the identities of queer and trans people of color, Muñoz conceptualizes the minoritarian subject as identities in difference. Muñoz utilized public sphere theory to understand the minoritarian subject as always in a relationship with the majoritarian public sphere. He posits that the majoritarian public sphere is one that privileges white, straight, cis-gender men. Thus, the minoritarian subject is one that is understood in relationship to the majoritarian. Similar to women of color feminists and the ways in which they build coalitions between each other, Muñoz employs the minoritarian subject not to erase the difference between trans and queer bodies of color but to note that all of us are defined by our notable difference from the majoritarian. Here again, Muñoz credits women of color feminists for their theorization of intersectional thought, noting that the employment of the minoritarian subject is to recognize that the domination experienced for each of us is different, but it is the same set of structural conditions that create that domination.

Muñoz theorizes using the minoritarian subject position to move towards minoritarian performance. Muñoz argues that minoritarian subject position must engage in survival strategies in order to exist in a public sphere that punishes them for not conforming to normative practices of citizenship. Towards this end, Muñoz is interested in moving towards a theory of disidentification. For Muñoz, disidentification begins and ends with performance. Muñoz places at the center of his analysis staged performances of queerness, activism, and performance of everyday selves by queers and trans people of

color as the mechanisms for survival in a theory of disidentification. As he explains, the minoritarian subject positions are always formulated in relation to normative conceptualization of queerness (i.e., white queers). And yet, these subject positions are not simply the ‘opposite’ of normative, or in other words in binary opposition to normative queerness; rather they are complex, nuanced, and at times overlapping and multiple. Put another way, it is not simply about being normative or non-normative; it is about complicating the binary between these ideas. As Muñoz writes, “Disidentifications is meant to offer a lens to elucidate minoritarian politics that is not monocausal or monothematic, one that is calibrated to discern a multiplicity of interlocking identity components and the ways in which they affect the social” (p. 8). The knowledge of how disidentification functions as a process of subject formation, as Muñoz explains, is one that is deeply embodied; for the minoritarian subject, disidentifying and survival is deeply embedded in the body, tied to memory, and is often evoked by and through performance. To this end, he asks us to understand the process of disidentification as a performance of counterpublicity that borrows, bends, and breaks ideas of (non)normativity that functions, first and foremost, as survival for queers of color, and then also provides glimpses of possible future relations of power. Simply, it is way that our body helps us survive and imagine possibilities for the future.

As noted, it is not the merely the ability of minoritarian subjects to survive that concerns Muñoz; it is what minoritarian performance does or could do in the future. He posits that minoritarian performance has the potentiality to disrupt the hegemonic nature of the dominant public sphere. C. Riley Snorton (2017) further notes that for the minoritarian subject, a social performance holds the potential to disrupt the normativity

of the public sphere; quite simply for the minoritarian subject, to remain alive can be understood as a revolutionary performance. Additionally, writing about the potentiality of minoritarian performance, Chambers-Letson (2018) posits that the minoritarian subject only knows what freedom is by its absence. In other words, the minoritarian subject has never experienced freedom and thus the actual feeling of being free is one we have never known; we know what freedom is by only knowing we have never felt it, it is part of our imaginary. Chambers-Letson suggests that during a moment of minoritarian performance the feeling of freedom is most closely achieved. For him, he understands minoritarian performance as a performance event that exists between an imaginary and the corporeal, where the feeling of freedom shimmers through. Subjectivity, survival, and potentiality is at the core of the minoritarian subjectivity. Corporeality, however, transforms subjectivity into agency; queer relationality, therefore, moves the theoretical into the material and highlights the power of the minoritarian subject.

Queer Relationality

I draw on the definition of queer relationality provided by Goltz and Zingsheim (2015) in their book *Queer Praxis: Questions for LGBTQ Worldmaking*. For Goltz and Zingsheim, queer relationality goes beyond how one queer person experiences another, rather queer relationality is a tool to reimagine how relationality looks like. For the authors, “it questions and keeps questioning, guided by an ethical commitment to disrupt, to upset, to turn, and to agitate. It is the impulse to resist the normativity that is embedded and continues to actively embed itself in our worlds, our minds, our relationships, our hopes, and our features” (p. 12). In many ways, queers are set up to fail within normative constructs of patriarchy and heteronormativity (Eguchi & Long, 2019). However,

thinking and relating outside of a traditional heteronormative paradigm is one way that queers make more livable lives for themselves; in doing so they simultaneously, expose and push back on the structure that creates the oppressive conditions of heteronormativity and patriarchy. As Muñoz (2009) wrote, the possibilities of queer relationality “are viewed as having the ability to rewrite a larger map of everyday life” (p. 25). To rewrite the same map where Pulse nightclub once stood.

Further, Goltz and Zingsheim (2015) take up queer relationality to be a central criterion in queer worldmaking. Indeed, while noting what queer worldmaking might be or do can sometimes be confined to the abstract, it is through the performances of our daily lives, our bodies, and our relationships that the abstractness of queer worldmaking comes to materialize. They see the potential of the possibilities of what our relationships might look like as a necessary step in resisting the violence of normativity. As they narrate it, queer relationality and queer worldmaking move us toward the question, “what else?” rather than simply, “what next?”

My understanding of queer relationality is rooted in a feminist mode of belonging. In this type of relationality, bodies relate to one another through differential belonging—a tactile way of maneuvering across communities of difference—which becomes a vehicle for bodies to rewrite or reverse the process of interpellation (Carrillo Rowe, 2005). More specifically, differential belonging reconfigures norms of both white supremacy and heteronormativity—for instance, by seeing the intersections between these forces as they constitute daily lives. Indeed, “by exploring the connections between whiteness and heterosexuality, we can begin to untangle the different layers that constitute identity categories in ways that seek not to reify their meanings, but to reveal the daily practices

and affective ties through which such categories emerge” (Carrillo Rowe, 2005, p. 39). For queer and/or trans bodies of color, differences in genders, skin colors, and class status, for example, can categorically differentiate bodies from one another. However, differential belonging, aids our ability to see our oppressions as connected and begin to queerly relate with one another and imagine new ways of being. In this way, differential belonging is way to relate through, rather than ignore or flatten, difference, to move toward a coalitional politic needed to dismantle systems of power and oppression (Lorde, 2017). As Goltz and Pérez (2010) acknowledge:

We cannot ever divorce ourselves completely from these strategic and stifling identities, nor collapse or erase the different ways we inhabit history, privilege, and space. Our identities are sutured to bodies that move through the world (and our personal discussions) differently, invoking and contesting differing histories, politics, and significations. Still, our queer alignment grounds our search for a politicized “us,” connection along the lines of queer, race, and gender politics (p. 250)

Indeed, our deep, personal, and often erotic discussions are always a part of the way we move through the world. We cannot separate ourselves from our desires, nor should we.

Desire and the erotic are both important interventions in theorizing queer relationality. Lorde (2017), details how we have turned away from the erotic as a source of power and information. Indeed, in a world where sex, generally, and queer sex, specifically, is considered taboo, a necessary turn is to understand moments of erotics as ways to strive towards excellence and “give us the energy to pursue genuine change in our world” (p. 30). Indeed, Muñoz (2009) extends Lorde when he argues, “Queerness is a

structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present... We must dream and enact new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds” (p. 1).

Writing from her own queer Brown body, Rodríguez (2014) writes through how racialized, gendered, and queer subject’s sexual desires cannot be understood outside of historical structures of power. There is a painful history of social and sexual domination, colonization, and imperialism for queers that is always racialized and gendered. Rodríguez further marks the material, emotional, and spiritual effects of marginalization as everyday wounds. She notes queer practices and gestures can never be entirely subversive nor outside the circuits of power. Thus, Rodríguez asks the question: How do queer gestures grapple with power and desire in the context of marginalization? She answers: “Through eroticization and pleasure, we are thus presented with the possibility of reinterpreting the pain and refusal of social intelligibility that constitute our daily lives, rescripting the social and sexual conventions that have defined us as racialized sexual subjects” (136). For the minoritarian subject, specifically, sex, desire, and the erotic become a way to gesture towards a horizon not yet here and makes the purgatory of everyday life more livable.

Queer relationality takes on many forms. For instance, Vazquez (2013) argues “The minoritarian subject can be understood as improvising with the world around them—even in its most flawed or false rendering” (p. 270). Vazquez uses the performative language of improvisation to shed light on how queer and/or trans people of color must live their daily lives. She further notes that the minoritarian subject does not have the luxury of choosing what we improvise with: we did not desire the events at

Pulse, but we are forced to perform in light of it none the less. Indeed, the previously cited authors provide the necessary framework for an underpinning of queer relationality that I utilize in this project: the minoritarian subject is always living in the conditions that the world forces upon us and within those conditions are our bodies and our relations. Yet it is through the real, performed nature of our relationships to both others and our world we hold the power to think of “what else?” For this project, queer relationality is a necessary step to get at queer worldmaking. In light of the Pulse nightclub shooting, trans and queer people of color and their relationship are changed; we are forced to improvise. Yet still, as noted above, the relationships we keep have the potential to challenge the conditions that made Pulse possible in the first place. Queer relationality is yet another way through which the minoritarian subject possesses agency to resist the normative and the potentiality to imagine something else. On the dance floor, we move to imagine something else. We long for the touch of another to help us feel something else. Spaces of queer nightlife facilitate the possibility of something else.

Queer of Color Nightlife

Several scholars have successfully completed research that have attempted to get at what queer of color nightlife does for the minoritarian subject (Bailey, 2013; Khubchandai, 2016; Rivera-Servera, 2014). All of these authors stress queer of color nightlife offers queer and trans people of color moments of queer of color world making; what we do on the dance floor starts to reach toward a utopia that is always on the horizon; what happens in a dark corner between bodies is twinkling towards emancipation, and gazing with desire at a dancer without fear of repercussion is a moment of survival. Writing on ephemerality, Muñoz (2009) suggest that while the

lingering imprint of a gesture in the club may not last long enough to be felt by those who are not club-goers or insiders, those echoes are still a source of sustenance and inspiration for those who were at the club. For instance, Khubchandai (2016) suggests that for queer south Asian men in Chicago, the club space allows for performances of femininity and childhood which is enacted through dance and other corporeal queer gestures. These performances are disciplined in dominant public spheres, particularly those influenced by Bollywood, that privilege dominant, normative, and often exaggerated notions of masculinity. However, “queer gestures in the gay desi club remember the diva citizenship that has been quelled by neoliberal Bollywood” (p. 45).

Yet still, Rivera-Servera (2014) notes that sites of queer of color nightlife, with all of their hope, home, and utopia, are built on the friction of fear that follows queer and/or trans people of color every day. Rivera-Servera explains that for all of the potential hope these spaces hold, they do not exist “by glossing over the obstacles and fears to be encountered en route or in the midst of pursuing [them]” (p. 206). Rivera-Servera reminds us that spaces of queer of color nightlife still exist in a public sphere that continually threatens the livelihood of queer and/or trans bodies of color. Queer of color spaces exist only with an understanding that there is tension for the minoritarian subjects to work through; a moment of violence can be just as close as an erotic moment. Indeed, the same tension is made visible and material when an event such as what happened on June 12, 2016 at Pulse nightclub occurs. Thus, one question that remains is: always within in the context of power and oppression, what is left after the club is gone, a place where relationality materializes, for the minoritarian subject? After the night where queer and trans people of color filed into Pulse and lost their lives, how do the rest of us respond? In

the next section, I detail the research question that guide this dissertation and pushes towards answers for the preceding question.

Research Questions

In his groundbreaking work, *After the Party: A Queer of Color Manifesto*, Joshua Chambers-Letson (2018), explores the potentiality of what takes place when the party is over, what happens when the event appears to cease in existence:

The title of this project refers to which comes after the party: the moment when the record comes off, and the students move into the streets of Selma or Birmingham, mobilizing the body in performance and protest to articulate their demands for Black freedom and More Life. But it also refers to what happens when a party comes undone, when the last meeting has taken place, and the movement has fallen apart. It's a reference to life that is lived after your friends and loved ones have died, and it is a gesture to those lingering moments in the early morning when there is nowhere left to go, though you and your people are still trying to refuge together. (p. 8)

The party at Pulse is over. Yet its afterlife lives on.

The literature reviewed in this chapter leads this project to be interested in Pulse's performative afterlife. Inspired by these literatures, I argue Pulse's afterlife, its consequences, are not confined only to the body; rather, they get performed and enacted through the body. The lives of queer and/or trans people of color are material and discussions of how those lives are implicated need to be thought of as active, concrete, and performative. In light of the theoretical and scholarly conversations in this chapter, the following research questions will guide this project:

RQ1: How do minoritarian subjects understand and perform their lives in the wake of Pulse?

RQ2: How has Pulse effected or shaped minoritarian subjects' relationships with others in their communities?

RQ3: How has Pulse effected minoritarian subjects' relationship with sites of queer of color night life?

RQ4: How are minoritarian subjects utilizing minoritarian performance, broadly, to survive through and resist against the conditions of oppression that made Pulse possible?

We, minoritarian subjects, are standing outside of what is left of the club, standing outside after the party. What's next?

Despite being 5:30pm, it is 85 degrees outside. But it is the humidity around 80 percent that makes it difficult to be outside. I am sticky and uncomfortable. What makes it more difficult to be outside is how exhausted I am.

I was out until 3am at Southern Nights; the show started and ended late. I met a Latina woman named Rebecca and our personalities meshed together well. We traded stories of what it is like to be queer and Brown in Orlando and Phoenix, respectively. Partly about the hardships but mostly we just chatted about where the fun is, who were fucking, and where to eat. We started talking because she asked me if I knew what the moment of silence was for before the show started.

“Of course,” I said hastily and surprised at the question.

“A lot of people don't know what happened here,” she said.

I feel a lot in that moment. Writing, researching, and thinking about Pulse for a year makes it hard to imagine there are bodies in the world that are not familiar with the intimate details of the event. I slowly move out of my dumbfounded-ness and understand that this should be no surprise—that the event from just three years ago has faded from the memories of many in our current geo-political climate. The moment mirrors the way in which the complexities of the shooting faded from the media; but that is why we are here, I think. Here in a club. At a show. In Orlando. The night before the third anniversary because this is where the memories of the place, bodies, and spirit(s) still exist. The feelings and gestures in this club are what is missing in all of those reports from the media outlets; it would require a queer person of color to do the investigative work after Pulse to think and go to a club to get the whole story (Thrasher, 2019). The time to report and observe in the aftermath was in the middle of the night on the beach at Parliament House; on the dance floor at Southern Nights.

This tension is on my mind as I am standing in the middle of crowd on a sticky Wednesday night at the interim memorial outside of what used to be Pulse nightclub. In fact, part of me really wants to leave, between the fatigue and the desire not to listen to the white cisman who is mayor of Orlando speak and the amount of local news outlets ready to capture the spectacle of the official memorial service that is about to occur.

Before I can make up my mind to stay or go, I see the outline of the same white scholar who took up space on the panel we were on together about Pulse. The one who uttered, “as a gay man who primarily dates Latin men, I could have been there.” I forgot he was going to be here continuing his research. I take a deep breath and make my way towards him.

“Greetings,” I say enthusiastically

There is an hour and a half before the memorial program starts, plenty of time to chat and catch up. Which we do. Our conversation is nice, enjoyable; we are newly acquainted, meeting for the first time since the panel a month ago. We speak about mutual colloques and academic interests. Somewhere between discussing the size of our undergraduate classrooms and the location for our disciplines next national conference, I feel eyes on me. The scholar on my left, still engaging with me in conversation fades to the background as I turn my attention to the man standing to my right. We lock eyes. He is handsome; he looks like a real gentleman. I smile. He smiles back. Here, outside of Pulse, outside of the club, we articulate the possibilities of what it means to cruise and be cruised (Muñoz, 2009). I know from that moment on, we are about to be entangled in each other’s stories.

“Have you gotten to teach a lot of classes as a graduate student,” the scholar asks me. I am pulled back into the conversation. I spend the next few minutes splitting my attention between the scholar and the gentleman. I move between conversations about our favorite texts to teach students with and about our favorite song on Lizzo’s new album, respectively. Tension builds between both of my conversational partners. On my right, the tension between the gentleman and I grow as we both know how this night will end. On my left, the tension between the scholar and I grow as he recognizes what is happening on my other side. Is it because we are at a memorial service, I wonder? Or is it because no one is talking to him; or rather, he has no one else to talk to? I will never know for sure.

As the program starts, the conversation between the gentleman and I morphs into silent glances, gestures that graze into another, whispers, and giggles amidst the seriousness of what is happening on the make-shift stage in front of us. I catch the scholar looking towards our direction more than once. I can feel a particular affect coming from the him; I can tell I am being judged.

At the conclusion of the memorial program, I turn to the scholar and ask, “So are you headed to dinner? Will you be going out tonight? I hear Stonewall has a show tonight; we might go.” I gesture towards the gentleman.

“No, I have to return home. Have fun with whatever you do tonight,” says the scholar.

We hug as he departs after, the white scholar who could have been there. Together, we witnessed the city-sanctioned memorial service for the events on June 12, 2016 together. Where he took diligent notes to use for his forthcoming monograph about identifying with and embodying with the lasting presence of Pulse. In this moment, all I can feel is a longing to take the scholar to a place of joy, to show him where the presence of Pulse really shines through. I waited too long though; he has already left.

What the scholar did not get to witness is the rest of the evening I spent with the gentlemen. The dinner we had together where he talked about the two people he had known who died three years ago while I held his hand. The intense game of rock paper scissors we had in bed to determine if we would go to the show at Stonewall or if we would just stay in my Airbnb and drink a bottle of wine together. The way he woke me up at 4am because he agreed to take me to the airport. The worlds we built together for

14 hours. The ones started outside of the club. The ones in memoriam. The ones which help us survive in a post-Pulse world.

CHAPTER 3

EMBODIED METHDOLOGIES / QUEER REALITIES

The first time I went to a queer bar was shortly after I turned 21. More specifically, it was on 8 January 2010, the birthday of the person I grew up queer with. We had both survived the (violence of) heteronormativity of our Chicago-suburban hometown; though neither of us were conscious of our queerness, we found each other nonetheless. Later, we each migrated south to Central Illinois to begin our college experiences. Indeed, it felt quite right we would enter the world of queer nightlife together. However, to be clear, by no means is Central Illinois a safe haven for queer bodies, particularly for queer bodies of color. Yet, it is where I first formed my queer sensibilities and thus its geography and context play a pivotal role in my relationship to queerness.

I remember the below freezing temperature and dusting of snow well. I was ready; I thrive at any task in the cool weather. We nervously, excitedly phoned a taxicab to take us the two miles from my home to the only gay bar in my small central Illinois home. If I am being honest, we were already drunk before leaving my home; we were young and nervous queers. That evening, I do not remember a site of liberatory, queer utopia that so many of us have come to associate with spaces of queer nightlife. Rather, what I remember are a few bodies seated at the bar, a sprinkle of colorful lights that hit a dancefloor no one occupied, and one particular interaction that has come to define so many of my experiences in queer spaces, specifically, and in the world, generally.

As I turned away from watching my queer sibling dance alone on the dancefloor, my body and eyes met another man who had appeared on the stool next to me. He was

taller than me and thus his presence felt all encompassing, almost threatening. He began to talk at me, and he called me handsome at the conclusion of every other sentence. I do not remember what he said until the very end of his dialogue, which concluded with a question.

“What are you?” he spit at me. His words stuck to me. Of course, he was referring to my ambiguous, racialized body, but I can only understand that as the object of his question today in reflection.

At this point in my life, I was not only forming my queer sensibilities, I felt my body experiencing racialization for the first time in my life. Of course, this was not the case; my body was always and always will be racialized, but my early twenties are marked with a salient felt sense of racialization. This was not the first nor would it be the last time that I heard this question uttered at me. But the memory of this man, in the very first queer bar I entered, will always sit heavily in my body, a wound which still throbs every once in a while. At the time, his question made me uncertain if I was queer enough to be there: now I understand it as a question motivated by race(ism). I think, perhaps, it can be both.

I open this chapter with this narrative not only to describe a wound, but also to use that man’s question as a generative one within another context. What am I? Or, more aptly, who am I? Particularly within the context of thinking, researching, and writing about Pulse? It is at this juncture I reflect on the many subject positions I embody.

Broadly, I identify as a queer, mixed Latinx/white, able-bodied, cis-man. I was born and raised as an only child in an upper-middle class suburb of Chicago. My mother and father were also born in the same general geography 35 years before me. My father’s

family is a large Italian American clan that traces their ethno-racial-national roots to the island of Sicily. My mother is first generation, her parents having migrated from Mexico, specifically from the state of Jalisco and the city of Guadalajara. Despite much of my mother's family being fluent in Spanish, I never learned.

As I grew up, I relied on the logics of whiteness to shield myself from having to be critically conscious of my Brownness. In other words, I learned how to perform whiteness well and my light olive skin allowed me to pass, particularly considering the Chicagoland area provided a diverse amount of bodies of color that could not pass in similar ways. When I move to central Illinois to begin my undergraduate education, I could no longer 'hide' being marked as a Brown body and at the same time began to become conscious of my own queerness. In this way, my embodied understanding of my queerness and Brownness are not only intertwined, they are co-constitutive of one another.

I spent six years in Central Illinois, until the completion of my master's degree at which time I migrated to Phoenix, Arizona to start a doctoral program, which is where I currently reside. While over the past decade I found comfortability (with)in my queerness, I often still feel uncomfortable with my Brownness and Brown spaces. To say this another way, with my inability to speak Spanish combined with an ambiguous phenotype that is often mistaken for white or middle eastern, I often suffer from feelings of being not being Brown enough (Cruz, 2001). I mark this, specifically, in relation to geo-political location of being in Phoenix where over 40 percent of people identify as either Hispanic or Latinx (U.S. Census, 2012). Indeed, my own (conceptualization of) Brownness in combination with being a transplant can often lead to feelings of

disconnection to queer and/or trans community of color here in Phoenix. I have, at times, struggled to find my place here. However, despite, or perhaps in some ways because of, this struggle, I, a queer, mixed Latinx/white, cis-queer man from the Midwest have made the choice to write through the complications, contradictions, and challenges of this dissertation project. More specifically, this dissertation project engages the queer and/or trans community of color in Phoenix, Arizona in order to identify the performative afterlife of Pulse.

In this chapter, I first lay out the different methodological lineages I draw from to conduct this research, specifically critical qualitative methods, autoethnography, and queer methods. Of course, all three of these lineages overlap, intertwine, and at times contradict. However, I name each to state my academic and political commitments to their theoretical underpinnings, particularly as they relate to this dissertation. I conclude with a letter which details the procedures and methods I conducted for this dissertation project.

Critical Qualitative Methods

In this dissertation, I utilize critical qualitative methods informed specifically by critical ethnographers. The field of critical ethnography grew out of the colonial and imperial practices of ethnography often attributed to the field of anthropology (Gupta & Ferguson, 1997). More specifically, anthropologists from prestigious, western institutions were well known for traveling to unknown and “exotic” spaces and observing how a “primitive” or “other” bodies performed daily rituals and making claims about a “other” society or culture that would often compare their way of being to the Eurocentric and western way of knowing and doing. In this way, ethnography was utilized in service of

western colonialist and imperialist practices of knowledge production and maintenance which always services white supremacy and heteronormativity (Adjepong, 2019). During the critical turn in anthropology, scholars such as Gupta and Ferguson (1997) pushed against the colonialist ways of the discipline and called for the field of anthropology to center the voices, bodies, and knowledges of the population included in the ethnography, rather than the researchers' imperialist agenda. However, as Madison (2012) argues, simply letting the voices from the field lead the research is not inherently critical ethnography. Indeed, she argues that much of the modern iterations of ethnography, while accounting for subjectivity, do not engage in critical methods because the goal of the research is still "what is" rather than what "could be" (p. 5). The "what could be," is what moves an ethnography towards a critical ethnography. Madison furthers at the heart of critical ethnography is social justice and power. Rather than focusing on what is in the field, a critical ethnographer is interested in what is missing, what is being silenced, what is possible, what (hidden) structures are (not) present and whose voices are not being heard and *why*. From this vantage point the critical ethnographer moves from the role of reporter to the role of advocate. This is another key point for Madison, the critical ethnography is not interested in being apolitical but rather the fieldwork spurs on opportunities to create social, political, and structural change.

It is here where I stake a claim for those wishing to do critical qualitative work with the theoretical underpinnings and, more aptly, the political commitment of critical ethnographers. In other words, I argue the critical turn in ethnography provides a sound ethical and methodological foundation for those who wish to do critical qualitative work that may not be classified or categorized as ethnography. I make this distinction to honor

the deep and prolonged time commitments, often years, that critical ethnographers devote to spending in the field and the labor and resources they spend to complete their projects. However, I also make this distinction to demonstrate both the utility and the urgency of methodologies developed by critical ethnographers. To be very clear, this dissertation is not a critical ethnography; however, it is imperative that I recognize the ways in which the methodologies developed by critical ethnographers have informed and shaped this project, particularly scholarship by Bailey (2013), Conquergood (2013), Madison (2012), and Rivera-Servera (2012). I do so by elucidating three key commitments made by critical ethnographers: positionality, data, and dialogue.

Positionality

Initially, critical ethnographers place great emphasis on a researcher's positionality, which is always in relation to the project and structures of power. First, leveling critiques of hegemonic conceptualizations of objectivity, critical ethnographers contextualize our own positionality—make it accessible, transparent, and vulnerable to scrutiny—to take ethical responsibility for own subjectivity and our political perspectives (Carrillo Rowe, 2005). Engaging with bodies is a personal experience; a conversation with an interlocutor riles up emotions within me. Being in a queer club takes me through a glittery ride of affects and at times transports me back to 8 January 2010. I experience moments of dissonance talking with interlocutors about living in Phoenix. Watching white, gay scholars take up space on a panel about Pulse fills my body with fury. The experiences I carry with me inform the way I move through the world; they are part of my embodied knowledge (Conquergood, 2013) and powerfully woven into and inseparable from the research process (Madison, 2012). In this way, I understand

ethnography as performance; the performance of ethnographic texts considers how cultural texts grapple with questions of history, power and politics. Madison argues ethnography as performance begins with a reflexive examination, of the researcher. Further, theorizing what they refer to as postcritical ethnography, Noblit, Flores, and Murillo (2004) posit, “Critical ethnographers must explicitly consider how their own acts of studying and representing people and situation are acts of domination even as critical ethnographers reveal the same in what they study” (p. 3). In other words, my positionality is vital in critical qualitative research in order to acknowledge my own power, privileges, biases, and disadvantages as I simultaneously critique power structures that create the conditions for my own livelihood as well as the livelihoods of the interlocutors present in this dissertation. Bryant Keith Alexander (2006) names this “critical reflexivity” which he defines as “both a demonstration and a call for a greater sense of implicating and complicating how we are always already complicit in the scholarly productions of our labor, and the effects of our positions and positionalities with the diverse communities in which we circulate” (pp. xviii-xix).

In a similar way, I draw on Jones’ (2010) notion of intersectional reflexivity as a foundation for understanding my own positionality within this dissertation. Intersectional reflexivity requires researchers to, first, acknowledge that power is fluid, complex, and present and, second, recognize one’s intersecting identities, both marginalized and privileged, to move towards embracing the messiness, the limits of not-knowing, and moving towards a space that puts my body at risk, “because doing so may create a safe space for someone else” (pp. 124-125). My body is not marked in the same way many of the interlocutors in this dissertation are. I am monolingual and have the educational

privilege to be writing a dissertation towards the completion of a Ph.D. I was not born in Arizona, nor even the Southwestern part of the country. I have access to knowledge my interlocutors may not, and I recognize my interlocutors hold knowledge that I can only hope to get a glimpse of through interaction and interviews. In this way, I am an “outsider/within” (p. 11), borrowing from the Black feminist Patricia Hill Collins (1999), since interlocutors and I share many of the same identity markers but not others. These complications and contradictions are essential for critical ethnographers, generally, and for this dissertation, specifically.

Data

A key and frequent question critical ethnographers are faced with is: what counts as data? It is, after all, a reasonable question when considering the methodologies employed by critical ethnographers. Indeed, Madison (2012) suggests, at times, data, theory, and method become one in the same. Madison’s assertion aligns well with how critical ethnographers answer the aforementioned question. Simply put, data is all around. While in the field, critical ethnographers immerse themselves into the context and culture they are surrounded by. Sometimes referred to as “deep hanging out” (p. 20), critical ethnographers orient themselves to whatever is happening around them and allow meaning to emerge from the places, people, interactions, noise, nature, movements, poetics and affects in their surroundings. Extending performance scholar Dwight Conquergood’s (2013) notion of returning to the expressive body, critical ethnographers simultaneously engage and are in tune to other bodily performances in the field; they also allow their own bodies to guide them to the moments in the field that are noteworthy. From a critical ethnographers perspective, data might not always be just the person in

front of them being interviewed, for instance; the data is also the man who walks into the coffee shop with a handgun in a belt holster; an occurrence that happened during a conversation an interlocutor and I were having. Even though eventually we directly addressed the man and his weapon, it was not until after the man exited that we were able to speak about what occurred. However, the way our bodies changed positions, the way we began talking softly, and the way affects hit our bodies before the man left were all part of data I collected during the interview.

Further, while I do not claim to have conducted an ethnography, I borrow from ethnographic methods when considering what counts as data and when considering what happens when I am no longer recording an interview. More specifically, all of the interlocutors that participated in this dissertation were people who reside in the Phoenix metropolitan area; I have known some of interlocutors before the interview and I continued to see some of them after the interview. In short, many of the interlocutors are part of my community. On many occasions, we have had on going conversations, I argue, related to the performative afterlife of Pulse. And while seldom have I had the chance to record them digitally (indeed, they are often fleeting, ephemeral moments), I made my best effort to make note of these using both pen and paper and in my own memory; Conquergood would refer to this experience as embodied performance. Embodied performance, in turn, becomes quite salient to the dialogic orientation critical ethnographers take towards the world broadly, and research specifically. In this way, performance becomes a mechanism through which reflexivity occurs, data is found, and thus frames the interaction between interlocutor and researcher.

Dialogue

Critical ethnographers do not define the relationship between the interlocutor and researcher as transactional; it is dialogic (Madison, 2012). Conquergood (2013) posits dialogue as a critical component to developing a relationship with an interlocutor. More specifically, he theorizes dialogue as performance—that is the act of dialogue is to engage in a bodily performance with one another. When dialogue is a performance, it is an embodied experience that leads to the co-production of meaning and knowledge, where both the researcher and the interlocutor know more about the other than they did previously. Conquergood writes, “this performance stance struggles to bring together different voices, world views, value systems and beliefs so that they can have a conversation with one another. The aim of dialogical performance is to bring self and other together so that they can question, debate, and challenge on another” (p. 9). Dialogic performance is necessary for critical qualitative work because it is where both the researcher and interlocutor discuss with, challenge each other, and push towards new ways of imagining the world together. With this in mind, I refer to the queer and/or trans bodies of color who are present in this dissertation as interlocutors to acknowledge them as an equal body participating in a dialogue and understand myself as a co-performer in our dialogues together.

I utilize the language of co-performer to nod to the performance methodological tradition of oral history. Madison (2012) describes oral history performance as a method that does not “function as factual reports as objective evidence, nor are they pure fictions of history. Instead, they present to use one moment of history and how that moment *in* history is *remembered* through a *particular* subjectivity” (p, 24, emphasis original). Indeed, to ask interlocutors to recall and dictate the memory of where they were when

they first heard the news about Pulse is not an attempt to produce a history report. It is way to gain insight into one particular experience from one particular body that is intertwined with memory, imagination, gaps, and layers of emotions, people, and places. In other word, it resists a stable rendering of history and values the incongruity of narratives. Further oral history performance provides theoretical insight to my role as a co-performer. As Della Pollock (1999) writes about her experiences collecting birthing narratives:

I made myself...vulnerable to being moved. Listening and writing, I saw myself as the register of someone else's power. Against the grain of current obsession with power of the researcher to shape, tame, appropriate and control the worlds he or she investigates...I more often not felt unnerved and overwhelmed, "othered," interrogated, propelled into landscapes of knowing and not knowing I would not otherwise have dared enter (p. 23)

Pollock's visceral and vulnerable words display the importance of the researcher as a co-performer in dialogic performance. And her words resonate with my own experiences as a co-performer. Sliding in between the present and the past, my interlocutors and I shared narratives of June 12, 2016. We often sat in silence, none of us having the words to move on. I sat in moments of uncomfortability, considering my cis-male and my white-passing privilege in relation to my interlocutors. We laughed through tears and dared to talk about intimate moments. We created the narratives in this dissertation.

Indeed, I understand narrative as part of the dialogic approach to critical qualitative methods. I lean on the four entry points for narrative research, developed by performance scholars Langellier and Peterson (2004), which are useful for interpreting

the meanings, functions, and implications of narratives derived from interviews. First, narrative as embodied emphasizes the co-performative nature of bodies in contact with one another. Our bodies impact the lives and stories of others, to understand narrative as embodied privileges both that stories live in our bodies and stories are (in)formed by those bodies surrounding us. Second, narrative as situated stresses the material conditions in which the narrative takes place. For instance, power, culture, and language make particular stories (im)possible. The situated nature of narrative privileges how context restricts and enables particular stories. Third, narrative as discursive regularities attends to what is considered meaningful and what is considered meaningless. Further, it is concerned with the interlocutor and what qualifies someone to tell a particular story, who does or does not get to speak for themselves, and who gets to speak for or about others. Primarily, narrative as discursive regularities “is a critical effort to discuss the conditions of discourse that frame what can be said, what can be understood, and what can be done in storytelling” (p. 20). It integrates how meaning is formed and recognizes meaning as a point of struggle to begin with. Finally, legitimation/critique recognizes the power narratives hold to reveal, break open, and revise unjust systems. The stories and bodies compiled in this dissertation are rarely known, hardly consulted, and often forgotten. The same stories, however, are substantial, beautiful, and poignant. And our stories, both my own and the interlocutors, move us towards “what could be” (Madison, 2012, p. 5).

Autoethnography

The nature of autoethnography is slippery; that is, it is difficult to define and explain it as a method, particularly when autoethnography is in relation to critical ethnography as their similarities and overlaps are numerous. Nonetheless, scholars offer

the contours of an autoethnographic method. Ellis (2004) writes that autoethnography involves writing about the self in relationship to culture. She argues autoethnography positions the self as co-constitutive of culture. Ellis conceptualizes autoethnography as “blurred genres in action” (p. 39); the blurring between the personal and the cultural is critical to understanding how autoethnography is produced and located at the personal level.

Spry (2016) furthers the goal of autoethnography is not to engage in autobiography, although the two are related. Rather, autoethnography is a way to examine culture through the sharing of your own experiences. Spry frames autoethnography critically, arguing critical autoethnography should not only shed light on cultural and knowledge but it should also critique the structures that dictate lived experience. Boylorn (2014) discusses the usefulness of critical autoethnography as a way of examining one’s belonging within a community. In particular, Boylorn argues that the ways in which autoethnography implicates a researcher as a cultural member makes possible a critical interrogation of “problematic cultural practices that [the researcher has] participated in” (p. 324). Further discussing the politics of autoethnography, Muñoz (1999) suggests that autoethnography inserts “a subjective, performative, often combative, ‘native I’” (p. 89) into the ethnographic project, thereby disturbing the hierarchical relationship between the researcher and interlocutors. Autoethnography in this instance also performs a reflexivity that does not take for granted similarities or differences in gender, race, sexuality, class, or national belonging, and their multiple intersections but instead embraces their complexities as part of the analysis. Taylor (2009) furthers, while considering how to qualitatively capture intersectionality, explains

intersectionality privileges structure rather than identity. The structure and the individual, however, have a distinct relationship in that the material realities of a person's identity are found in the lived, everyday experiences of that person. Therefore, in order to critique the structure, the stories of the everyday must be present. Throughout this dissertation, I offer autoethnographic accounts that position myself as a queer body of color that has experienced the trauma of Pulse. In these accounts, I detail how structures of whiteness and heteronormativity create the realities I experience. Additionally, however, I also implicate myself in these structures in service to dismantle the power structures that continue to disenfranchise and marginalize bodies. I do so in order to demonstrate the potential of autoethnography to reveal hegemonic ways of being, such as normative racialized, gender, and heteronormative distinctions of subjectivity. In this way, I draw on Mignolo (2011) to understand autoethnography as a decolonial option, in which one can build a world in which many worlds can exist.

Critical to my conceptualization of autoethnography is the practice of performative writing. Calafell (2007) explicates performative writing is an embodied approached to writing that asks the reader to feel the text. She argues performative writing is an important strategy to evoke a felt sense of personal and cultural memory. In this way, performative writing compels the author to write from/through the body. Our bodies carry the stories we feel. As we reengage the stories we carry, we recall how our flesh felt in the moment. Therefore, I draw heavily on women of color feminisms and the ideas found in theories in the flesh. As Moraga and Anzaldúa (2015) write, "a theory in the flesh means one where the physical realities of our lives—our skin color, the land or

concrete we grow up on, our sexual longings—all fuse to create a politic born out of necessity” (p. 19). Anzaldúa (2002) further elaborates, theory in the flesh:

comes from opening all your senses, consciously inhabiting all your body and decoding its symptoms...Attention is multileveled and includes your surroundings, bodily sensations and responses, intuitive takes, emotional reactions to other people and theirs to yours and, most important, the images your imagination creates—images connecting all tiers of information and their data. Breaking out of your mental and emotional prison and deepening the range of perception enables you to link inner reflection and vision—the mental, emotional, instinctive, imaginal, spiritual, and subtle bodily awareness—with social political action and lived experience to generate subversive knowledge. These *conocimientos* challenge official and conventional ways of looking at the world, ways set up by those benefiting from such constructions (p. 542).

Put another way, performative writing allows the personal to become political and displays the political as personal (Pelias, 2005). Performative writing becomes one important way scholars, particularly marginalized scholars, translate the personal, felt sense of theories in the flesh creatively onto the page (Johnson, 2001). In this dissertation I utilize performative writing, rooted in theory in the flesh, to enhance the autoethnographic accounts decolonial potential (Gutierrez-Perez, 2018).

Queer(ing) Methods

This dissertation also draws on a growing body of scholarship that is working towards queering methods and methodologies. Queer theorists Amin Ghaziani and Matt Brim (2019) write in the introduction to *Imagining Queer Methods*, queer methods are

the often less familiar companion to queer theory. They attribute this unfamiliarity of queer methods to two major stakes queer theory has. First, queer theory, in part, developed in order to disrupt the normativity of the majority of academic work, particularly by disrupting binary and categorical thinking (e.g. male/female, heterosexual/homosexual) and pushing back on social scientific approaches to validity and empiricism. Ghaziani and Brim (2016) explain, with an emphasis on non-normativity, the phrase queer methods can invoke an “apparent incommensurability” (p. 16) because the word method implies a root of normative knowledge production in the academy. Second, queer theory frequently describes its object of study as unstable, fluid, and ephemeral. Love (2019) reports that the ephemeral nature of queer work often leads queer scholars to report, “I have no method.” Indeed, queer scholars rely on and resist disciplinary and normative methods, yet as Love suggests, to “see one’s practices as beyond method and utterly undisciplined is a failure to reckon with queer scholar’s position in the university; it fails to recognize the violence of *all* scholarly research—even its most insurgent and intimate forms” (p. 30). However, as Ghaziani and Brim (2019) posit, “methods are queered” (p. 15) when we utilize the theoretical underpinnings of queer theory to mold and explore what is possible with or existing procedures. In short, naming queer methods and theorizing from a position that features them is essential to the political and academic project of queer theory. In this dissertation, I grapple with the tensions and contradictions of queering methods in several different ways: multiplicity, non-normativity, space and time, and pedagogy.

Multiplicity

First, a queer method relies on an understanding of multiplicity to resist normative assumptions of, for instance, race, gender, and sexuality (Ferguson, 2004). Here, I refer to multiplicity as in relation to and opposed to “canonical ideologies” (Ferguson, 2004, p. 24) of culture which promote a universality shared understanding of, for instance, ‘the queer experience.’ In this way, I draw on a definition of queer and queer theory as a way to denaturalize and destabilize normative and taken for granted categorical assumptions—gay and lesbian or straight and heterosexual—in order to unveil historical projects to delineate between ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal’ (Somerville, 2007). With this in mind, interlocutors were recruited with recruitment materials that asked for individuals who self-identified as queer. Interlocutors, however, during interviews self-identified and disclosed a variety of labels to describe their own sexual practices. Rather than attempt to categorize them, I understand each as part of a constellation of localized understanding of queer cultural production.

Additionally, multiplicity also refers to the ways in which, for example, racial and sexual mutually constitute one another. In this way, queer theory borrows from women of color feminisms with their focus on both multiplicity and intersectionality (May, 2016). For instance, Marlon Bailey (2013) demonstrates through a performance ethnography of ballroom culture in Detroit how to examine queer cultural formations that resist normative notions of gender, sex, and kinship. For instance, the call I used in this project to locate interlocutors asked for individuals who self-identified as a queer or trans person of color living in Phoenix. One interlocutor, a Black woman, suggested I talk to her friend who was Jewish. When I interviewed the Jewish identified interlocutor, they self-described as a “white-passing Jewish, Romani, and Israeli” person. Instead of

discarding the interview, in the analysis section, I utilize this interlocutor's unique subject position to question normative assumptions of race formation, particularly as it interests with the complications of the Jewish body.

Non-Normativity

Queer theory's intellectual project decidedly has an investment in and sees heuristic value in non-normativity (Yep, 2003). In this dissertation, I take up queer theory's investment in non-normativity in two distinct ways. First, I borrow from self-described, Black feminist poet and troublemaker Alexis Pauline Gumbs (2016) who presents her distinctly genre queer study depicting moments of Black women and girls fleeing and seeking freedom from gendered violence and racism. She queers the arbitrary, artificial, and liminary binary between the creative and the academic. Inspired by Hortense Spillers, poetry is not just an alternative way to understand feminist history but is a necessary intervention to capturing more fully the stories and lived experiences of those whose lives "made and broke narrative. The quiet, the quelling, the queer" (p. xii). Smith (2019), continues her "positionality as a working-class, queer woman of mixed heritage is reflected in [her] nonbinaried, fluid choices in research method" (p. 209). In other words, as a woman existing at particular intersections of difference, Smith's approach to research and method reflect her intersectional experience. She names her approach "intersectionality-as-artistic-method" (p. 209) to demonstrate the way she fuses methods, creativity, music, and art together in her work. Throughout this dissertation, but particularly in Chapter 4, I orient myself to Smith's approach to research in order to queer the boundaries between the creative and the scholarly. Between the poetic and the probing. Between the art and the analytical.

Second, I take up non-normativity as queer method by understanding desire as (part of) method. In her critique of oral history as method in the discipline of history, Boyd (2008) argues in order to capture queer histories, one must “*move beyond the limits of intelligible speech*, that is, racially coded articulations of desire, in order to produce a *more complex account* of the history of sexuality and *sexual communities*” (p. 186, emphasis added). While disciplinarily bound, Boyd’s critique pinpoints an important note for any research attempting to capture queer cultural production: desire (1) cannot be erased from our histories and (2) cannot be captured only in the spoken word. For instance, working to what she calls, desire’s method Probyn (1995) theorizes desire as movement. She argues desire points us to the movement of different body parts: his hair, his neck, his fingers. Of course, Probyn continues, parts of the body connect to other images: her talent, her physicality, her communication. In this way, she unhinges desire from a whole body; rather desire is queerly present, spilling in between bodies as movement which connect us to different images of a person. Said a different way, queer desire is not always the desire to fuck, although sometimes it is, but it is ephemerally present between queers as images move us through interactions with one another. Performance scholar E. Patrick Johnson (2019) argues that oral history performance, and co-performative witnessing, allows for capturing desire between the researcher and the interlocutor, which he argues has enormous implications for queer history. I agree with Johnson and Boyd and recognize desire as not only present in, but more importantly, critical to conducting queer research. I understand desire as an affect that should be considered in the analysis of data and take it up as such in this dissertation. Perhaps Probyn (1995) concludes best with, “in simple terms, queer desire is where we start from

and what we go with. While this may sound very ephemeral and abstract, I'll wager nothing could be more concrete" (p. 16).

Space and Time

Queer theorist Jack Halberstam (2005) writes, "Queer use of time and space develop, at least in part, in opposition to the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction....They also develop according to other logics of location, movement, and identification" (p. 2). Indeed, queer people exist in a space and time unique to themselves, not always recognizable to those who are not queer. I argue, this is particularly true for queer and/or trans folks of color, who are often stigmatized, discriminated against, or simply not welcome in queer spaces that largely cater to white, cis-gender, gay men (Rodríguez, 2016). After all, this is why Latin night existed at Pulse. It was the time where Brown queer and/or trans bodies gathered. In this dissertation, I consider seriously how the ideas of queer space and time hold methodological considerations and implications. For instance, interlocutors had their choice of where to be interviewed. While several asked to be interviewed at bars, none of them asked to be interviewed at bars that designate themselves as queer spaces. As one interlocutor, Daniel, described it, "You know there are gay bars and then there are bars that are really gay." I understand this comment as an interlocutor's orientation to queer time and space and therefore understand the space where the interview was conducted as important to the method. Further, some interlocutors elected to have their partners or other queer kin with them during the interview, again, making the space a salient point of analysis—although in this case, bodies help curate a particular special or comforting aesthetic or affect. Returning, to Halberstam (2005), queer time emerges from living through atrocities—

such as the AIDS epidemic—and redefines how queers orient themselves towards notions of futurity. Further, Muñoz (1999) writes about those queers who have died before us, particularly queers of color, as part the present for those of us who are still alive. In a project that engages Pulse, a tragic event—where lives were lost and queer and/or trans folks grapple with our own futures—which occurred over three years ago, in which I inquire about a performative afterlife happening in the present, and further ask interlocutors to speak about the future, an orientation to queer time becomes essential. As often our histories, present, and futures fold into one another; refract off one another; and contort through one another.

Pedagogy

Finally, I see queer methods as co-constitutive to the project of queer pedagogy. Ghaziani and Brim (2019) suggest that theorizing, writing, and publishing on queer methods provides a bridge between (queer) students, scholars, disciplines, and institutions. Indeed, queer pedagogy is not only a particular onto-epistemological orientation to the world and classroom, it is about a particular way of being in the world. In this way, my orientation to queer pedagogy is informed by the queer communication scholar and pedagogue Benny LeMaster, who defines queer pedagogy as, “an embodied pedagogy that ruptures the performative sedimentation of normativity through a commitment to ‘intersectional reflexivity’” (p. 83, LeMaster, 2018). Queer pedagogy is an embodiment of queerness.

Queer methods and queer pedagogy, therefore, rely on one other to understand the process of knowledge production as non-hierarchical, collective, and always in motion. We need queer methods to do queer pedagogy and we develop queer methods by

engaging in queer pedagogical practices. However, the means by which queer pedagogy gets done are slippery; there is no singular way to engage in it. For instance, LeMaster (2018) suggests queer failure—a form of failure in which students become unable or unwilling to reproduce particular ideologies—as a mechanism for doing queer pedagogy. In turn, in this dissertation, I suggest a form of queer pedagogy that engages, what I call, a post-Pulse pedagogy. I do so by relying on Fawaz (2016) who conceptualizes the queer studies classroom as a dance floor. In a queer studies classroom, we as a collective of students and teachers congregate to mingle around shared concerns, experience desire for both ideas and bodies, sweat through consciousness-raising sessions, an intellectual orgy. As both a politic and ethic, a post-Pulse pedagogy is required to ensure students experience the sensual, erotic, and affective nature of ideas and bodies – it is a concrete step that leads to students who see a dance floor at a club and join in. Therefore, a post-Pulse pedagogy requires an embodied performance of an ethic of care; a type of that privileges ongoing dialogue, resists conclusions, and a willingness to engage in openness (Conquergood, 2013). Indeed, then, a post-Pulse queer pedagogy is only possible through the deployment of a queer method. In this way, I approached each interview with an interlocutor with an embodied ethic of care.

Method²

² I write this method section in a particular autoethnographic style utilized by Latinx scholars called *testimonio*. Specifically, *testimonios* are a form of scholarship/discourse that create “new understandings about how marginalized communities build solidarity and responded to and resist dominant culture, laws, and policies that perpetuate inequity” (Delgado Bernal, Burciaga, & Flores Carmona, 2012, p. 363).

11 October 2019³

To:

Stanley Almodovar III

Amanda Alvear

Oscar A. Aracena-Montero

Rodolfo Ayala-Ayala

Alejandro Barrios Martinez

Martin Benitez Torres

Antonio D. Brown

Darryl R. Burt II

Jonathan A. Camuy Vega

Angel L. Candelario-Padro

Simon A. Carrillo Fernandez

Juan Chevez-Martinez

Luis D. Conde

Cory J. Connell

Tevin E. Crosby

Franky J. Dejesus Velazquez

Deonka D. Drayton

Mercedez M. Flores

Peter O. Gonzalez-Cruz

Juan R. Guerrero

Paul T. Henry

Frank Hernandez

Miguel A. Honorato

Javier Jorge-Reyes

Jason B. Josaphat

Eddie J. Justice

Anthony L. Laureano Disla

Christopher A. Leinonen

Brenda L. Marquez McCool

Jean C. Mendez Perez

Akyra Monet Murray

Kimberly Morris

Jean C. Nieves Rodriguez

Luis O. Ocasio-Capo

Geraldo A. Ortiz-Jimenez

Eric Ivan Ortiz-Rivera

Joel Rayon Paniagua

Enrique L. Rios Jr.

Juan P. Rivera Velazquez

³ This letter was handwritten and transcribed verbatim in order to preserve the integrity of the *testimonio*. Any additions and clarifications in this section appear in footnotes.

*Yilmary Rodriguez Solivan
Christopher J. Sanfeliz
Xavier Emmanuel Serrano Rosado
Gilberto Ramon Silva Menendez
Edward Sotomayor Jr.
Shane E. Tomlinson
Leroy Valentin Fernandez
Luis S. Vielma
Luis Daniel Wilson-Leon
Jerald A. Wright*

Hola todxs, all 49 of you,

I've been meaning to write to you for a long time. But to be honest, I am not really one to write letters. I am more of a go to a bar and sit down with you type person. But since we cannot do that, I decided to write you all from a bar.

So I apologize in advance if my language is less poetic and more direct than I would like it to be, I am nervous and words are proving difficult. But I hope the gin and tonic I just ordered will lubricate my pen.

You are probably wondering who I am and why I am writing to you.

My name is Michael Tristano Jr. and I am a Ph.D. Candidate at Arizona State living in Phoenix, AZ. I am also a mixed Latinx and queer person. I am invested in making the world one that is more just. I often feel like I fail at it. But I am trying.

Anyway, I am writing to you all because I have spent a lot of time thinking about you—in personal and professional ways. Although I never expected the latter.

I remember waking up to the news of what happened at Pulse and silently weeping to myself as I watched the coverage. I spent that morning mourning you. I was and still am so sorry.

I was out of town when it happened but when I got back to Phoenix I went Karamba, our gay Brown club. I danced for all of you.

The January after it happened, I was part of a night of performances, called After Orlando, in downtown Phoenix.

On the one-year anniversary of losing you, I did not leave my bed.

And of course, I continued to dance.

Those were all things that made sense to me to do.

But in March of 2018 something unexpected happened; I was sitting in our student lounge on campus just after sending my doctoral committee an email. I was in the middle of preparation for my doctoral comprehensive exams and I was feeling the stress from not yet having a dissertation topic. When a wave of thought and emotion about you all and Pulse made its way through my body.

“I should write about Pulse,” I thought.

I mean, it was obvious because I taught about it every time I walked into the club, saw my Brown queer family, I saw the police at pride, I was intimate. So, I decided to.

But I needed to do it in a way that honored you all. And respected you all. That is, I had never been to Pulse—never even heard of it before—and I never met you. I wasn’t interested in making claims about you all or your community in Orlando (that bullshit happens all the time in the university).

So, I decided to go to Orlando that summer on the two-year anniversary. I was there for four days and I remember how long and hot it was. But mostly I remember how sad I felt. Sadness for days; all day every day. I went to memorials, observed vigils, and visited museums. I remember going to a gay bar (it was Stonewall, I believe) and there was no

one there. It felt like a metaphor for the whole trip (really, it was more so because it was 3:00pm). Reflecting on that trip, I now understand I was looking in the wrong places for the people and ideas I wanted to get closer too.

So when I started working on my dissertation proposal, I knew I wanted to investigate how queer and/or trans folx⁴ of color experience Pulse outside of Orlando and in the mundane; the everyday. Originally, I wanted to do this across geographies in the U.S. But I was advised to think about doing the research only here in Phoenix—which felt hard for me because I don't always feel connected to other queer and/or trans folx of color here.

But I agreed and I started recruiting people to talk about Pulse in Phoenix. And what I realized quickly is people are full of life. Tragedy has a way of making you forget.

So this past summer, I went back to Orlando for the three-year anniversary and I had a wildly different time. I went to the site where Pulse once stood for the memorial, of course. But mostly I played and danced. I met some of your family (chosen and given). I felt like this was more of a way to honor you.

⁴ I use folx to indicate as a way to indicate in community expression, often to signify who occupy non-normative social locations of gender and sexuality (Kapitan, 2016).

From March 2019 to September 2019, I interviewed⁵ and recorded⁶ conversations with 12⁷ different queer and/or trans folx of color⁸ who live in Phoenix⁹; in each conversation, we talked about ideas like how we remember June 12, 2016 to how we organized to how it lives in our bodies now to dancing. We were queer, trans, Black, and Brown. We gathered in offices, coffee shops, and bars, and spoke over the phone. We cried, we laughed, we flirted.

So, I write this to you all to say not that we did this for you, but we did this in your name as we continue to survive in this place.

I write this to you all to say that people remember you, people who never met you.

I write this to you all to say that even though all of the people I talked to are different, we recognize our queer and/or trans of color sensibilities and energies as mutual. Just as I imagine you all did.

I write this to you all to say that the queer and/or trans of color sensibilities we all share guide my methods and methodologies in my dissertation project.

I write this to you all to say that even though I now associate you all with a dissertation, you are so much more than that.

⁵ In Appendix B, I share the interview guide that served as a fluid framework for this project. Most interviews ebbed and flowed naturally moving through topics that focused on living in a post-Pulse world.

⁶ Each interview lasted between 35 minutes to an hour and half and were conducted either in person or over the phone.

⁷ To identify possible interlocutors, I utilized a snowball sampling. I first reached out to friends, community members, and community organizations and, from there, I was connected to each of the interlocutors.

⁸ To qualify, an interlocutor had to self-identify as a queer or trans person of color.

⁹ This research was submitted to and approved by the Institutional Review Board.

*I write this to you all to say I don't always know what I am doing but I am doing my best.
Because you all deserve that.*

*By now, I have successfully finished two (!) gin and tonics and I feel as if (or hope) that
this letter has accomplished the goal of telling you all what I have been up to and why it
might matter to you all. I do not really know how to end this—like I said, I am not used to
writing letters.*

In Solidarity,

Michael

CHAPTER 4

PRECARITY, DISIDENTIFICATION, AND WORLDMAKING: PERFORMING THE AFTERLIFE IN PHOENIX

(Mundane) Racial Violence in Communication Studies

I am looking forward to class this week. At the conclusion of my third year as a doctoral student, I look forward to enjoying one last foray in a communication studies graduate course. I am enrolled in a one-credit module in my department entitled “Post-Colonial Autoethnographic Methods,” and this particular week we are sharing a first draft of a project we are each working on. My project is engaging a queer of color history I share between my mother and myself; the section of the draft I will be reading is about the first time I saw *Rent*, my mother’s (queer) sensibilities, and my connections to the characters of Angel and Tom Collins. The project is an attempt to engage how the intersection of Brownness and queerness shaped my youth. I am eager to receive feedback on my piece from one of the only Brown professors in my department. I am also pleased to have another queer person of color in the class to share my story with, a Black queer woman from a department outside of my own; we have developed a fabulous rapport. We are friends. Our queer relationality shapes my orientation towards the class; I find it to be productive, engaging, and joyful.

After I read my draft a rush of euphoria fills my body. I am grateful for this space in my department which has granted me the opportunity to explore this project. It is one of the rare times I feel not only included but also valued in our departmental classroom spaces. As I sit in the afterglow of the reading, I am listening to a white graduate student in our department begin to read his piece. His work engages whiteness and this particular

project is a piece which traces the racism he has encountered in spaces he considers home. He details the working-class environment of a hometown bar that he, his brothers, and father often hang around in. He continues to show how casually racism becomes reified in space with all white bodies through vernacular discourse and begins to repeat words that he has heard used in the bar at one point or another. They begin as common racial epithets; beaner, half-breed. He continues to list them off, and I begin to feel uncomfortable. I lock eyes with the other queer person of color; we feel each other's bodies being exposed in ways that his white body is shielded from. The epithets morph into harmful slurs. I can see how calm he is while reading creating a vast dichotomy between the chaos and vulnerability I am feeling in my body. I know where this is headed. I looked towards my friend and find her eyes gazing towards the floor. And then it comes. Slipping out of his mouth like they were old friends; the n-word.

My body feels like everything around me has come to a screeching halt after an extreme act of violence in the classroom. In reality, however, the student continues to read. Calmly. My eyes dart to the Brown professor in the front of the room. She too looks calm, as if nothing out of the ordinary has happened. Perhaps I most disappointed in this moment. A reminder of how flippantly racial violence is tolerated in our discipline (Chakravartty, Kuo, Grubbs, & McIlwain, 2018). A reminder of how we, people of color, can and do contribute to racial violence. A reminder of how violence for queer and/or trans people of color is both mundane and fantastical (Chambers-Letson, 2018). The next person to read their work in progress is my queer of color confidante; she shares a beautiful story about the labor and struggle of fighting for environmental justice in Phoenix. The crux, however, of the project centers on the joy that comes along with a

successful gathering of activists demanding environmental justice in downtown Phoenix. She reminds me, for queer and/or trans people of color, violence is, for better or for worse, always at the intersection of joy, survival, and productivity.

In this chapter, I identify and detail three sections of analysis that come from my interactions and interviews with interlocutors regarding the Pulse nightclub shooting. I draw on Bhattacharya (2017) who argues that themes do not simply emerge from data; themes are not agentic. Rather, while engaging in qualitative analysis, the author identifies patterns across data codes and categories. Through a process of deep analytical thinking and reflexive writing, I have identified three sections of analysis that were verifiable patterns across and within data sources; (1) constructions of precarity and safety, (2) moments of disidentification, and (3) queer and/or trans of color imagining. It is important to note that drawing the delineations of these analytical categories are both helpful and arbitrary. They are helpful in so as they allow me, the author, and you, the reader, to follow along in an organized way with the story I interpret the data as trying to tell. They are arbitrary because the data, which are found in transcripts, messages, and our bodies, do not feel divisible. Each story could be told a different way; each holds contradictions and intersections I may have overlooked. We know that categorical understandings of race and gender, for example, are colonial projects that limit our understanding of what race and gender can be and what they can function as (Arvin, Tuck, & Morrill, 2013). The same argument is easily extended into many empirical types of qualitative data analysis. Conquergood (2013) explicates returning to the body necessitates complicating how we understand and relate to data. Therefore, in this

chapter, I attempt to present that data and my analysis of it in a way that is both messy and digestible, to honor how the data feels in my body. Through this chapter, I find the performative afterlife of Pulse to be one that is material yet not generalizable. Real in the sense that Pulse changes the ways in which minoritarian bodies move through the world materially. Pulse remains not only a felt sense but can be connected to actions, movements, and gestures. How those performances manifests, however, are nuanced; they cannot be categorized neatly nor should they be. While queer and/or trans bodies of color can be understood as a collective, subject positions continue to center difference as a point that matters. Within this chapter, the performative afterlife shines through. Nevertheless, like the way light shines through different panels of stained glass, the afterlife creates a colorful constellation of light.

Constructions of Precarity and Safety

Geographer Nancy Ettliger (2007) writes precarity is an essential part of the human condition. Critiquing Judith Butler's *Precarious Life* (2004), wherein the author suggested a precarious life is a post 9/11 condition, Ettliger argues precarity cannot be bound spatially and temporally. In other words, Ettliger acknowledges for Americans, for instance, after 9/11 a sense of precarity does wash over the masses, namely white Americans who most often feel secure in their social and political standing both within the United States and the worldwide political arena. However, she argues that understanding precarity as only reactionary to events of terrorism does not highlight the structural component of how different bodies experience uncertainty, and thus precarity, as part of the mundane every day. She argues, "precarity is located in the microspaces of every day life and is an enduring feature of the human condition" (p. 320). She furthers

events like 9/11 (or an event such as the Pulse nightclub shooting) render precarity visible for particular communities or bodies, yet they do not account for how precarity is infused into everyday life. Indeed, in this way, Ettliger's conceptualization of precarity exists in between and betwixt everyday violence (mundane) and acts of radical violence (spectacular). Precarity is felt by all, she extends: even those who may occupy positions of privilege may feel precarious in an authoritarian system of capitalism, for instance. This is why Ettliger posits, "precarity is engendered by a wide range of processes and, as it extends across space and time and also materializes (differently) in social, economic, political, and cultural spheres, it is an enduring feature of the human condition" (p. 324). In this section, I analyze how the Pulse night club shooting renders the precarious lives of queer and/or trans bodies of color visible, particularly within the context of Phoenix, Arizona. Further, I explicate how interlocutors describe their positions of precarity in conversation with other (marginalized) communities. Finally, I explore how, in the face of precarious positions, queer and/or trans people of color conceptualize what safety looks like and feels like.

Armed on Thursday in Fucking Chandler

On a Thursday afternoon I sit with Liliana¹⁰, a Black, queer/bisexual woman, in a small crowded coffee shop in Chandler, Arizona. Only about 19 minutes have passed since I started tape recording, and I am about to ask Liliana one final question from the first set of questions on my interview guide. Liliana responds, "Um [sigh] I feel like in

¹⁰ All names have been changed to pseudonyms

the media it was like, just like so convoluted, because there was all the like... [pregnant pause] sorry [quivering].

“No, take your time,” I respond with.

“No. This dude is fucking carrying in Chandler on a fucking Thursday. Are you serious?”

Cool. That’s necessary,” she says.

“Because we live in Arizona,” I say.

We pause and chuckle half-heartedly, now hyper-aware of our bodies in this space. We continue the interview for another three minutes until the man with the gun leaves the coffee shop with the beverage he felt was so essential he needed to protect it with a firearm. We pause at that point to sit with one another, breathe a sigh of relief and exchange stories how neither of us have ever held a firearm before. Liliana speculates he might be a cop because she thinks she saw a badge in his pocket. I look around and note that no one else seems to feel a sense of relief. I would estimate no one else in crowded shop even noticed the man had a gun on him. Perhaps it is because we were talking about an act of radical gun violence or perhaps it is because of the space and bodies we occupy; the uncertainty that comes with our precarious position, we must always be aware.

Liliana and I will complete the interview that day, although for me, the presence of the man casts a particular hue on the rest of our time together that day.

In many ways, the moment that Liliana and I share is an exemplar of how queer and/or trans folks of color make sense of their position of precarity in Phoenix. It is well documented that violence by the United States agents of the state (Ritchie, 2015) and violence inflicted by non-state agents (Kesslen, 2019) disproportionately affect queer and/or trans folks of color. For interlocutors, the precarious position they occupy existed

before Pulse and yet is highlighted and changed by what occurred at Pulse. In this way, Pulse becomes a reminder of the mundane violence always facing queer and/or trans bodies of color (Chambers-Letson, 2018). For example, Rafael, a gay, Hispanic man, works as a bartender. He shares that during the summer of 2016, he was working at a gay bar in Phoenix that no longer is in operation. He explains that he was only working as a bartender for about a year and a half and did not realize until he started working in the industry how many instances of disgruntled, agitated customers he would have to deal with. When the events at Pulse happened, however, Rafael shares the local gay bars organized a meeting of all the service workers. When I asked what that meeting felt like, he responded, “It was very, uhhh, calm? Like not in a bad way but just in like, a way of like, hey this could happen here. It just happened to other bars. This could happen here. So what could we do about it?” When I ask Darius, a Black, queer non-binary person, about mourning after Pulse happened, they share:

I remember one day in particular, I had like gotten out of the shower and I was just kind of like looking at myself in the mirror and I was just thinking, like, this is one more. I mean at this point we had lost, you know, Trayvon Martin. Uh. Like etc. You know what I mean? I’d be going off like. And I was so used to honestly like sharing about my brothers and sisters, like, being killed by the police or otherwise, very publicly. Um. [pause] And that just like broke my heart and infuriated me more and more. Not to stigmatize but like fuck there’s another one. There’s another one. There’s another one. And so Pulse was another collection of my brothers and sisters dying.

Nia, a Black, queer woman and a drag performer, echoed Rafael and Darius, adding, “this is the life I live regularly, right? I’m in these bars. I’m in these shows. I’m out with my friends. That could have easily been Phoenix. New York. Chicago. You know what I mean?” The previous responses highlight how queer and/or trans lives are always live in close proximity to death. Pulse, however, makes salient that precarity.

For some interlocutors, the precarity rendered visible by the Pulse night club shooting manifested into particular (in)action. For instance, Sandra, a Puerto Rican, pansexual woman, shared that after Pulse she was unable to bring herself to organize or mourn in public spaces. When asked why, she shares:

Mostly because they're scary to me. I'm always afraid of something happening. And I know that's an awful thing to say. But I'm just so terrified that it's going to be bombed or is going to be shot up. Or and like as a social justice documentarian, like I was at that Trump rally that one time right before the gas masks were taken out and the bombs went off. And it was a fine protest up until that point, and like that, it's just terrifying to me. And I just think I think I had a little too much like a fear to do anything about it.

Sandra's response highlights the beginning of a performative afterlife. She details how Pulse made salient an affect of precarity in her body. However, the affect she expresses feeling becomes performed when she makes the choice to stay away from public mobilizing or rituals of mourning. Another example of precarious affect becoming performative comes from Sammy, a Black, gay man, who shares after the events at Pulse, he felt motivated to join Ignite. Ignite is an organization whose aim is to combat HIV/AIDS in the metro-Phoenix area. Ignite is regularly found at bars passing out condoms and even with rapid HIV test kits. During our interview, Sammy explains that for three months after the events at the Pulse nightclub, he found himself in a state of "disbelief and sadness" for about three months. I ask Sammy what he did during those three months of melancholia. He pauses and ponders and replies, "I actually think that's when I joined ignite." The way he says his response feels like he is connecting the dots between Pulse and his motivation to volunteer. As if he never realized how his actions were connected to his embodied response to what Pulse is and was. When I ask Sammy why he chose to join Ignite, he responded, "I wanted to be a part of making a positive

change.” He shares that he is still actively involved in Ignite today. Both Sandra and Darius display how the event created an affective response, one in which that drove them to a particular behavior. The afterlife materializes in responses that vary from one person to another. We may be motivated to volunteer, are we may be simply be clinging on to life when someone comes into a coffeehouse armed on a Thursday in fucking Chandler.

Malleability of Whiteness

Queer and/or trans scholars of color have documented the challenges that frequently face them, particularly because of the ubiquity of whiteness in the queer community (Eguchi, 2015; Yep, 2003). Because whiteness is a system that is perpetuated not simply through the color of one’s skin but rather repeated behaviors and communication practices that re-center white dominance and supremacy, it becomes difficult for queer and/or trans folks of color, in the face of every day precarity, to identify people who have a sustained and lasting interest in challenging the dominance of whiteness. Interlocutors detail how the events at Pulse illuminate the ubiquity of whiteness in the queer community. Kenneth, a Black, queer non-binary person, detailed their experience of attending a vigil after the shooting. They described it as:

It was in Madison, Wisconsin, because I was doing my undergrad at the time. Um. And you know, it was at the Capitol Building, it was primarily white audience, or, I mean, I don't know if I wanna say audience but you know, crowd, I guess. And uh there was, you know, someone talking and taking up a lot of space, I don't even remember what they were saying, honestly, but it was just not really appropriate for the setting. And you know, people's emotional well-being at the time. And a Black queer person spoke up and was kind of venting how the city of Madison treats queer people, especially queer POC. And that person was, you know, after saying that, in that space, that person was kind of being attacked by other people. Again, mostly white folks, I don't know, their sexual orientation, you know, but they were at the vigil, so it could be anything.

Kenneth, made the choice to leave the vigil stating that, “it was just very bizarre.”

Kenneth’s concern for the most vulnerable of the queer community is echoed by another respondent when I ask him about how Pulse has changed or shaped the way he views his relationship with the queer community in Phoenix. In describing a conversation he was having regarding the desire for police presence in queer spaces, Daniel, a queer/gay, Chicano man, explains how:

I felt like it showed a blind spot because it's not like [people who embody whiteness] necessarily don't care or don't want to be consider it. You know, probably some don't care. But just the sort of lack of awareness, and the readiness to go to the thing that made *them* feel safe. Which I say without judgment, because like when people are afraid, they try to feel safe, great. But like, um, then even not every conversation after that felt like genuine listening to the concerns of other people.

Additionally, describing the conversations he was having with his white queer friends after Pulse, Sammy narrated, “sometimes white people say things that I'm like, a lot of times you don't even realize how hard it is to be a person of color.” Diana a mixed, Japanese-white, non-binary lesbian, dictated ever so keenly how spheres of whiteness work to together to strengthen white supremacy on a larger institutional and systematic scale. Regarding media coverage after the events at Pulse, they share:

Um, I don't feel like what was covered was more like, in the middle-ish later, what did we talk about, like the gay part? Especially, they didn't talk about how it was like, lots of people of color that were killed. That wasn't...I never saw that...And that's just frustrating that like, mainstream, like media coverage of like, gay issues is like, so generalized to like the white gay experience.

Rodney, a Black, queer man, perhaps puts it best when describing queer people who voted for Trump when he says, “And guess what those gays are? They’re white. Because before they are gay, they are white.” Rodney continues: “Just because you're gay. I don't know why people...I want to like put this on a shirt! I said, just because you're gay does

not mean you cannot be bias and prejudice like the rest of us.” All of the previous responses tersely show the precarious position the minoritarian subject occupies for being a person of color in communities that so clearly center around the logic of whiteness. The responses highlight the clear division between white and non-white bodies within the queer community. It is important to note here, the events at Pulse did not create such a division; rather, for interlocutors the division has become more salient. While the articulation of whiteness within the Phoenix queer community is not in and of itself a performative gesture that necessitates an afterlife, I argue the ability to identify and name whiteness is a key step in Pulse’s performative afterlife.

Of course, not all interlocutors shared stories of clear division between those who occupy whiteness and queer and/or trans bodies of color. For instance, Rafael describes the aftermath of Pulse as one that unified the community across categorical understandings of race; however, he goes on to narrate,

I feel like Pulse brought everybody together. But then now that people forgot about it. Uhhh. Everybody's just being bitchy and catty towards each other again, which is kind of upsetting. I'm like, we're in the same boat. We are discriminated against by other people. But yet, once where we're, uhm we're a unified community when something bad happens, but then once we forget about it, everybody goes back to being that bitchy, cliquey community. That's why I feel like I don't have a lot of gay friends just because it doesn't happen a lot. I don't know, we I don't know how it is, I'm mostly familiar with the gay community here in Phoenix. You know, I don't know how it is with other people, in other places. But I feel that the gay community here in Phoenix is very...what is that word called? Exclusive?... I feel like the gay norm is being like skinny, white. Primarily.

In this powerful quotation, Rafael demonstrates the power of whiteness to re-center itself after the crack Pulse created, a crack that Rafael signals to mean a potential moment of unification. In his quotation, Rafael explains how whiteness is the normative mode of

being in Phoenix. Its presence is felt; I feel it everyday. For those who do not have access to whiteness, disconnection becomes the place where whiteness exits. However, the events at pulse created a moment where Rafael felt connected, a moment where he did not feel the dysconnectivity of whiteness. Rafael's expression and longing for connection is one that is echoed by Darius when they share:

The lack of in town [queer and/or trans of color] fellowship, I guess I didn't feel much of a loss because...I was able to relate it to all of the Black loss I have had been experiencing continuously over the last 28 years of my life.

For Darius, Blackness becomes the vehicle for which to understand how queer and/or trans people of color are disconnected to the community in Phoenix. Throughout the interview, Darius regularly mentions systematic anti-Black violence and murder; noting the loss of Black life like Trayvon Martin and Sandra Bland. From within a Black body, Darius makes sense of the lives lost at the Pulse nightclub through their experience of routine anti-Black violence; in other words, the mundane violence Black bodies must live through provided a schema for how to understand an act that disproportionately effected queer and/or trans bodies of color. Their connection is an important one, as whiteness always relies on the logic of anti-Blackness to usurp different bodies into performances and expressions of whiteness (Sexton, 2008). For instance, Puar (2007) argues that the project of homonationalism is a strategic one to welcome white gay men into the fold of what she calls homonormativity, a form of queerness that reifies the power structures of white supremacy and capitalism. For someone one like Darius, however, their Black body and non-normative gender expression relegates them to the margins, left with a sense of disconnection and lack of support from the queer community in Phoenix.

As Karma Chávez (2016) argues, after the events at Pulse, the mainstream media utilized xenophobic and anti-Muslim rhetoric to pit communities of color against one another and simultaneously erased the intersections of those who were lost. This study's interlocutors concur with Chávez; Jordan, a gender-fluid, bisexual Jewish person, describes their friends' reactions to the event at Pulse when they say "we are not going to let this become about Islamophobia. At all. Because that's not what this is about." Daniel agrees, when he says, "And, you know, like, there's also kind of a complicated aspect of the shooter being Muslim and like claiming to identify with ISIS messages. And so. As like. I don't know, I guess I thought about a lot because it's like I'm an anti-Islamophobe." Diana furthers, in recalling their pleas to those posting on social media, "I posted a caption that this was a hate crime against the LGBT community, this is not about ISIS or terrorism. Like be supportive of the gay community, but also like, not Islamophobic."

I agree with the interlocutors and Chávez in their critique of against anti-Islamic rhetoric and policy. I argue, however, that, in the wake of Pulse, the interlocutors pointed to a much more covert and dangerous form of whiteness than what Chávez most aptly points out. While, clearly, interlocutors did eventually begin to speak about the ubiquity of whiteness in the queer and/or trans community in Phoenix, some were quite hesitant to name whiteness as a force they felt in their body. For example, searching for words, as I sat across from him I could see and feel Sammy attempt to articulate what he was feeling when he describes friends he was talking to. Before answering the question I had presented to him, in a hushed tone, barely audible to the microphone he says, "Can I say white?" Similarly, Rafael describes an interaction where his friend was ignored at a bar

because “Just because they don’t fit into what...[pregnant pause] what they’reeeeeee....Their norm I guess, gay norm I guess. Quotation.” Rafael chuckles as he pantomimes air quotes. He then looks at me at the and repeats “quotation,” and in that moment I can feel his desire to be recognized by another person who feels the weight of whiteness on their body. But it is a desire Rafael looks for cautiously. When I ask him to describe the gay norm again, he finally dictates, “white, skinny.” The weight of what whiteness feels like for these two men, and their difficulty to articulate and name it, points to a concerning aspect of whiteness. It is both felt and yet at times difficult or intimidating to call out. As white queer bodies have become normalized in popular discourse, minoritarian subjects face difficulty being included in queer public spheres, and further, face backlash when attempting to call out the normative (whiteness) practices of queer communities (Bell & Binnie, 2004). Indeed, these governing practices of whiteness make it all the more difficult for minoritarian bodies to engage in critical conversations about its reach and power.

Further, both Rafael and Sammy articulate another form of covert whiteness that is found in the queer and/or trans community of color community. As McKibben (2014) argues, as we continue to believe we occupy a post-racial world, where people of all colors and races begin to mix and bodies begin to bend into ambiguous racial formations, many believe this is indicative of movement beyond categorical lines of race. However, as McKibben argues, this could not be further from the truth. In fact, as whiteness begins to encompass bodies of color that have the ability to pass as white, it only further reifies racial lines for those who are unable to pass. While Rafael and Sammy experience ridged racial categories differently, both nod to this point. After articulating the exclusionary

whiteness he has felt in the community, Rafael tells me he does not like going to Karamba, the Latinx gay bar in Phoenix, because no one will seem to talk to him there either. He shares, it is not until he begins to speak Spanish, his native language, that his half Brown, half Japanese body is recognized by those in the club as acceptable. As whiteness begins to include light Brown bodies and bodies who have the ability to pass, the precarity of those who do not/cannot/elect to not pass grows. I argue, for many native Spanish speakers and dark Brown bodies, gatekeeping becomes a way of survival in the face of whiteness that threatens increasing amounts of potential violence. A way of survival that reifies racial categories. To be clear, the blame must not be put on individuals but rather the systematic logic of whiteness that creates the position of precarity. Queer and/or trans bodies of color continue to face marginalization and discrimination both from inside and outside the queer community. It is, however, necessary to complicate how the malleability of whiteness both relieves potential threats of violence for some and compounds those same threats for others. The danger, even further, seeps through as logics of a post-racial society would lead many to believe we are past the point of racial bias and discrimination; making systems of whiteness much less visible and therefore much harder to dismantle. Further Sammy, Black man, explains that when he first moved to Phoenix, he had trouble finding a group of Black queer men to create fellowship with. He continued to narrate:

Apparently, there's this Facebook group called the network or something. And it's for African American men of color to like, advertise events, promote events, things like that. And there's these admins that like, run it and kind of like vet people. So, you have to apply to join this group and answer questions. And kind of the same thing happened with uh, and I talked to one of my friends who invited me to, and he said, how it really matters to those people like for them to know who you are, and to know that you hooked up with. I guess, well, they said,

because there's such a small community of African American gay people here that they want, they don't want to sleep with people that they know, they're going to like, see.

In Phoenix, a space where pockets of liberalism clash with a conservative white majority, the queer community is not immune to destructibility of whiteness. In contrast, the malleability of whiteness thrives in a geo-political place like Phoenix. Phoenix is a place where survival becomes a necessity. Survival through whatever means guarantees another day.

(Un)safe spaces

There are serious issues with safety being queer and/or trans and of color in Phoenix; this specific city is a precarious place to find oneself. The responses, however, on how to create more safe spaces remain contested. Yet, they do share a key core: community defined-ness. Liliana describes this well when I asked her to tell me what safety means: “I feel like part of that is just like having, like really clear values. Almost like a mission statement.” Her response is critical one, as it allows for contradiction and nuance when negotiating what queer and/or trans of color safety looks like, particularly in the wake of Pulse. Indeed, Liliana’s words elude to a (un)safe space. One striking example comes from Jordan, who narrated what they did the day after the Pulse night club shooting:

My response was to like, all right, now it's time for me to own a gun. Because I am as white and straight presenting as I am. Like I don't, like, it's tough with like mass shootings like this. Like, there are so many arguments that are like shitty as fuck on the right of like, well why don't we just arm teachers or arm blah blah blah and like that's not necessarily the answer. But the people who are a part of marginalized communities, do want to continue to have guns and be able to protect themselves in their communities in their ways. Like that for me, like where the answer lies. It's like a militant response to the kind of like deep-seated entitlement of predominantly white Christian men.

In stark contrast, Nia shares:

I don't feel like if you're going to an event like Pride you need your gun. Right? Why do you need a gun at a pride event? Walmart, why do you need your gun, you're getting potatoes? What are you going to do? Why do you need a gun in the supermarket or understand most people, they're like, okay, anything can happen. You know, somebody's coming in. I'm gonna be the good guy. But we don't know that you're the good guy. All we know is that you have a gun.

Rivera-Servera (2014) iterates the minoritarian subject faces real danger both within queer of color nightlife spaces and outside of them. For instance, as a queer person of color treks through the night to find refuge in the dark corner of the club, they put their minoritarian bodies at risk. Jordan and Nia's responses engage Rivera-Severa's claim. Both acknowledge the relative precarity of their bodies and the bodies of those they seek desperately to protect, yet they land in very different arenas regarding to enact and reach toward safety. I marvel at Nia's last line, "all we know is that you have gun," when put into conversation with Jordan's statement. Nia does not know Jordan; she has no way to know that they likely share the same critical commitments to queer and/or trans communities of color. How would Nia ever know Jordan was one of the "good guys?"

However, considering the weight Pulse places on queer and/or trans bodies of color, safety, particularly in queer spaces of nightlight, must now include, more than ever before, considerations of state actors. David, Hartal, and Pascar (2018) argue through an ethnographic examination of queer spaces in west-Jerusalem, queer spaces are highly at risk for (re)producing normative discourses and practices of securitization and safety. For instance, the authors argued that a queer riot/protest/party in a public park that did not include armed security failed to make people who occupied positions of non-normative sexual and gender and identities feel safe in the public eye. However, armed security

placed at the entrances at spaces of queer nightlife reproduced insecurity and violent discourses. David, Hartal, and Pascar's arguments are reflected in the conversations I had with interlocutors. Sandra puts it simply when she says, "I don't want more policemen. I want more action being done to prevent policemen from being there." In contrast, Darius states, "I mean honestly, it's bad these days and age. But you gotta have like, bodyguards. Like guards. Like guards with like a gun."

In Phoenix, officials with guns become particularly important and salient to discursive constructions of safety because of the prevalent presence of undocumented bodies. As Daniel indicates, "In Arizona, you have to account for undocumented people, and how like, we have got to be making queer spaces that are welcoming to people who don't have papers and umm like police presence is not how that looks." Diana expresses a similar sentiment when they say:

Yeah, I mean, I'm like, that's like the obvious answer, like, bring cops to the gay club. But like for me, that's a very obviously, obviously that's not an answer. Because, you know, police are just gonna use that as an excuse to like, lord over queer people, and then to, like, target people to arrest for no good reason. You know, it's the same reason why you don't want police at pride, because like, especially in the States, like, I don't want like, people to go, like, get in trouble for being like undocumented or whatever, you know?

When speaking about his experience with all of the service workers who worked in gay bars following the events at Pulse, Rafael tells me that he is "glad they had the police officers talking about this." Yet, he goes on to say that ultimately the police officers were not ultimately welcome at their queer establishments after Pulse because:

I feel that when it's more open when you talk to friends and coworkers than it is when like, there's actually a police officer there just because they have their own set, set things of what you should do. But like I said, not everybody thinks the same way. And how about if we all went the other way of like, oh, let's try to save

as many people as we can. Even though the first thing that they tell you, the police officer told us to do is to try to save yourself first. So, kind of contradicts what we want to do what they want us to do.

In this way, Rafael strings together Liliana's opening statement about holding close community commitments and demonstrates the wavering precarity between guns or no guns. Police or no police.

Ettlinger (2007) argues clearly levels of precarity ebb and flow between different bodies and between different points in time. That is, minoritarian subjects experience a sense of precarity more frequently than white queers, per se. In addition, how precarity is being experienced is influenced by what outside events or forces have occurred. Simply put, minoritarian subjects experience affects of precarity every day and the events at Pulse render that precarity more visible and impactful to minoritarian subjects. Ettlinger further notes that precarity is feeling experienced by all, it is part our social fabric. From the data I have collected, however, it is clear: how we respond to precarity, how it manifests in behavior and emotions spans a wide range. As Liliana states, "I feel like part of that is just like having, like really clear values. Almost like a mission statement." Yet as precarity manifests differently for different body, it begs the question, who is writing our missions statement? Who is (un)safe in our spaces?

(Mundane) Hetero/homonormativity in Communication Studies

It is the second semester of my doctoral program and I am struggling. I am struggling to find my place in my discipline; in my department. I hardly ever see myself reflected in the material or bodies I encounter in graduate seminars, and after a first semester that almost led to me voluntarily leaving the program I am trying my best to

float on. To survive. My methods seminar is almost an entirely white classroom, and no other self-identified queer people are in course with me. It usually has me crestfallen; a wave of isolating difference fills my body for three hours a week. Today, however, I am looking forward to class because we are sharing our ideas for our seminar projects. This semester I want to try doing fieldwork and writing from my own perspective, something I have very little experience with. Indeed, besides a cursory read of an essay/chapter on autoethnography, I have no training in writing from the flesh. But looking over the methods course syllabus, I have come to realize if I am truly committed to doing this type of work, I am going to have to educate myself and seek mentors outside my home discipline. Armed with that determination, I am excited to present my idea for my class project.

With an enthusiasm and gusto I have not displayed all semester, I begin to describe my idea for doing an ethnographic account of Phoenix Pride; in particular, I want to pay attention to how the increasing amount of corporate and capital interest works to further a white, hetero/homonormative space at pride events. I am eager, yet preliminary, with the description of my project. I have ideas and I am hoping there is someone in the course who can point me towards theoretical and methodological directions that will be able to help germinate the small seeds of ideas I have. The reception of my proposal is, generally, favorable, albeit less helpful in terms of points of connections and directions in comparison to some other projects that have been shared. One student suggests I investigate the work of my own graduate advisor, most clearly doing so in order to make a connection between any queer scholarship they can think of in the discipline. Overall, I was pleased with what I presented. After a trying first

semester, accompanied by projects that fell outside my general areas of academic interest, it felt triumphant to re-stake my claim.

After all of the students present their projects, formal class instruction began. Fewer than ten minutes pass when the woman sitting next to me passes me a handwritten note. A bit confused and somewhat entertained, I open the note which reads “hey i’m bi, we should write together :)” I look towards my colleague, a student in my own graduate program, perplexed. For several reasons. First, while we have never had a seminar together before, I have gathered quite clearly that her interests fall clearly into the realm of organization and managerial communication, with little to no attention paid to race or sexuality. Second, I find it curious that a white woman, with a cis-male partner, and with whom I have shared an office with for seven months, would seize this particular moment to reveal her queer identity to me. I look over to her and she flashes me smile. My body, which has been socialized and disciplined to know the different between when my body and/or perspective is being fetishized and moments of true coalition, tells me this is not a moment of collaboration; it is a moment of potential co-optation. During our break, I engage in a discussion with my colleague, and I ask her what it is she might see us collaborating on together. She talks vaguely about how she is a bisexual woman in a committed relationship with a cis-man, and she would like to explore this part of her identity. I smile, and I nod, and I appear interested; when really all I can pay to is the soft whisper of Muñoz’s (2009) words on the back of my neck. In *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, Muñoz frames performance of queer failure “as being something like the *always already* status of queer and other minoritarian subjects in the dominant social order within which they toil” (p. 173). Said another way, queer subjects

enact failure because of their experiences with normative systems of power and privilege. Further, Muñoz suggests attending to performances of queer failure highlights the ways minoritarian subjects enact resistance through embodied and mundane behavior and ultimately lead to imagining new futures. I feel my body failing in this moment with my colleague, attempting to categorize my (perceived) sex practices as legible only through her lens of white femininity. I say thank you and appreciate her comments and say let us keep in touch and think about how a future project might benefit both of us.

That is survival.

At the end of the semester, through my ethnographic account of Phoenix Pride, I draw on Muñoz once again to demonstrate how white femininity enacted through white gay men and white (gay) women upholds the capitalist structure that undergirds the celebration which further pushes queers of colors to margins, and I beg the reader to imagine a celebration divorced of such capitalistic interests.

That is the future.

This is story will melt, like wax, and be remolded and remade once again. It the repetition that makes these stories mundane.

Performances of Disidentification

In “Feeling Brown, Feeling Down: Latina Affect, the Performativity of Race, and the Depressive Position,” José Esteban Muñoz (2006) pens, “the depressive position is a site of potentiality and not simply a breakdown of the self or the social fabric. Reparation is part of the depressive position; it signals a certain kind of hope” (p. 684). For many of us queers of color in the academy, Muñoz’s body of work has been a literal lifeline to

save our professional and personal lives within a system that continues to perpetuate violence against those most vulnerable. Further, like so many women, queer, and trans authors that came before him, what makes Muñoz's essays so theoretically rich and politically salient is his commitment to the body. His subjects were performers, activists, and mundane citizens to demonstrating how theory is born from and performed by bodies. Therefore, when I, an academic, hear the quotation that opens this section, my first response is to understand it as an explanation and point of potential for my place in the academy. Yet, Muñoz's work also brilliantly explicates bodies and performances outside of academic contexts. Muñoz (1999) highlights through the process of disidentification wherein minoritarian subjects rely on discourses and performances produced by public sphere to survive and ultimately engage in minoritarian worldmaking. The depressive state is mundane for minoritarian subjects. However, through the process of disidentification, working through the depressive state holds the potential to imagine a new type of future. A new way of being.

In this section, I rely on the work of Muñoz to explore how interlocutors disidentify through particular moments during the aftermath of the Pulse night club shooting. Initially, I explore how interlocutors disidentify with event at Pulse in order to survive the experience of being a minoritarian subject in Phoenix. Finally, I explore how the interview we engaged in together acts as a rupture from the mundane survival mechanisms interlocutors harnessed in the wake of Pulse.

Put it Back into the Vault

Sandra and her partner sit across from me outside on a cool May evening. We all have previous relationships with each other, and I was pleased Sandra brought her

partner, JJ, with her. JJ, a white woman, sat mostly in silence for most of our 50-minute interview but never once took her hand off of Sandra's. I know Sandra to be a woman who lets her emotion sit on the surface, so I know working through some of these questions is difficult for her. I am glad she brought her support system with her. When I ask Sandra if she ever publicly or privately mourned after Pulse she pauses and responds, "I don't know if I could say if I outwardly mourned. No." She pauses, smiles, looks towards JJ, and shares the following narrative:

But I did at this moment. Not in the...very recently, actually, me and JJ realized how bad of lesbians we were because we haven't been to Boycott¹¹. And we were out drinking. And we went to Boycott. And we went into this smoking room. And I had this one second of like, almost like paralyzing fear, because it was a smoking room, but it was indoors. And I was like, what if someone came and shot up this place right now. I mean, that was like, a thought that went through my brain for like, one moment. And it was, like, terrifying and paralyzing; a little bit past. Because I was tipsy. I was kind of like, shut the back of my brain. And I know that astrological signs are not a thing. But I feel like as Capricorn, I'm a cold person, and I try to protect as much as I can. So, like, something scary like that, like a flashback like that, like I just try to like, not get into the vault, put it back into the vault. I don't mourn like most people do.

Here, I argue, Sandra refers to the memory of Pulse and the embodied affect that comes with that knowledge as being kept in a vault. While Sandra cites her Capricorn disposition as reason for needing to keep Pulse hidden, Muñoz (2009) would argue that Sandra is disidentifying through the event of Pulse. Muñoz posits, facing multiple, interlocking systems of oppression, minoritarian subjects must use the code of the majority for empowerment, resistance, and most importantly, survival. For Sandra, she

¹¹ Boycott, more colloquially known as Boyco♀♀, is a queer bar located in Phoenix that caters specifically to queer women and femmes

implies a need to keep Pulse out of the forefront of her mind if she intends to continue to go to queer spaces as a queer person of color.

Kenneth echoes Sandra's performance with a performance of disidentification of their own. I asked Kenneth to recall what they remember about media reporting after the events at Pulse. They said "I just remember, like the term gay night club, like everywhere." I asked Kenneth to describe how that made them feel, and they shared the following narrative:

It made me feel really strange, because I think that was like the only time that like like, like, within that the title. That was like, some of the only times I felt like the conversation was even about, like, who those people were, who were killed, if that makes sense. And maybe outside of that, it was a lot of conversation again, about like, who was the mass shooter this time? And then a lot of numbers, a lot of like death counts, and wounded numbers. And stuff like that. I mean, I really try not to read a lot of stuff, at least like the first week, I think. And then after that, I kind of just turned away from it. I feel like until I was confronting it like a year later.

Here, Kenneth explicitly identifies the specific bodies that were lost at Pulse as a catalyst for disidentifying. They were not numbers nor statistics; they were people who they could see parts of themselves in, and it required a performance of disidentification to survive it. I followed up with Kenneth and asked what it felt like to confront the event a year later.

They responded:

That was...that was, when I was working on the staged piece. And it was, it was really hard. I remember distinctly that that piece is one of the only things I've ever performed that has made me cry on stage multiple times, and during rehearsal. And in practicing it, it was really, really emotional for me. And I have not really returned to it much after performing it in [name of show]. I think, because it is very emotionally overwhelming and I'm just not always willing to be that vulnerable.

Kenneth provides another clear example of the necessity of disidentifying through the event of Pulse. After attempting to write and perform their own piece of poetry that

confronted their body as a target, Kenneth still was not ready to (re)engage the fact that their body is a target every day. In the two years between their performance and this interview, Kenneth goes on to explicate that this is the first time where the feelings of vulnerability they describe need to be confronted again. To survive in a world where their body is a target, Kenneth demonstrates the need to disidentify with the Pulse night club shooting; they cannot ignore it happened and yet it is too difficult to sit with and engage with the specificities of the trauma.

Muñoz (2006) argues that performance of queer failure occurs when minoritarian subjects refuse to be legible in dominant systems of oppression. Yasmin Nair (2018), writing from a queer feminist of color perspective, argues that for queers, and more specifically queer women and non-binary people, queer bodies become legible to dominant discourses only when they are understood through violence. Jordan, who is non-binary but publicly femme-identified, refuses to recall the violent details of the event, refusing to make themselves legible through a framework of violence. They recall, “And like, I couldn't tell you what time of year it happened. And like, that's a detail about it that I just, I don't remember. Like, I don't remember what time of year it was like I don't remember where I was living and all I know is I woke up in a bed.” Refusing to perform normative scripts of trauma, Jordan goes on to detail how they immediately got to work and checked on their own community members. Their performance of failure resulted in productive labor for the future of their communities (Muñoz, 2006).

Labor, however, falls on queer and/or trans bodies of color disproportionately (Aguilar & Johnson, 2017). Labor that includes relaying the realities of what is like to exist in a body that is under such scrutiny, particularly when it comes to teaching

individuals who identify as cis, straight, or white. This labor is both affective and material, as it necessitates at times minoritarian subjects to recall or relive trauma. Nia recalls working at her job the day after the events at Pulse occurred and shares:

A few of my former co-workers and they're like, cis-straight white males, right? They don't really, you know, like, they didn't get it. They didn't understand what we were saying. Because it was, it was a couple of us queer color folks. that work in this environment. So, we were very like on edge and then you know, these white guys are like, I don't understand why everyone is so upset and I'm like, Okay, I'm just gonna break it down to you the best way you can understand. You're at the bar with your buddies. Somebody walks in and starts shooting up the bar. Well that's fucked up. Exactly.

Liliana, however, describes the reason for avoiding conversations about Pulse with white bodies, in particular, because of the labor associated with having those conversations. She explains:

It's like, let's not forget Pulse happened on Latin night. But like, I don't know, I just I hate that people like think that that isn't a detail about it. Because, like, it's just you know, white people specifically don't understand intersectionality of all of those identities. Like, I can hide the fact that I'm queer pretty easily. I can't hide the fact that I'm Black; like I'm out there.

Diana extends Liliana's logic, suggesting there are reasons why they do not engage in discussions about Pulse with their white friends. They describe:

There are things that are really specific to being like a not white person, even if like, the specific like, background isn't the same. It's just like the shared experience of like, not having white privilege. And then, you know, you can only talk about how annoying white people are to your white friends so much before they start to get their feelings hurt. You know.

It is clear, through conversation, interlocutors identify reasons as to why disidentification is necessary. Minoritarian subjects in a majoritarian public sphere embody the capacity to bend and break systems of power to survive. And while survival is key to Muñoz's theoretical development, he is also deeply concerned with how the minoritarian subjects

utilize performances of disidentification to harness queer of color world making to imagine more shimmering futures.

Queerness is (not yet) Here

As Muñoz (1999) wrote, “[Melancholia] is a mechanism that helps us (re)construct identity and take our dead with us to various battles we must wage in their names—in our names” (p. 74). The previous sentence, put in conversation with his definition of “disidentification [as that which] resists the interpellating call of ideology that fixes a subject within the state power apparatus...[,] a reformatting of self within the social” (p. 97), raises the question: What if the minoritarian subject is too preoccupied with survival to reformat the self within the social due to the inability to experience moments of mourning or melancholia? In other words, if we never find the chance to experience melancholia, a space that exists between necessary militancy and indispensable mourning, how will we ever harness the productive power of melancholia that serves as a catalyst to map the conditions of identification and (im)possibilities which shape minoritarian subjects? And without such a map, is reformatting the self within the social ever possible?

The questions posed above lead me to a different, one to which the data collected here can illuminate an answer. If a minoritarian subject is so fully focused on surviving under conditions that render their bodies as targets more frequently than experience moments closest to freedom, how can a catalyst be created to move the minoritarian subject closer moments of melancholia? By now, it is clear that in the wake of the Pulse night club shooting, interlocutors who I spoke with have detailed challenges about what it can mean to be a queer or trans person in Phoenix. Can the interviews collected for this

dissertation change, offer an opportunity for interlocutors to explore their relationship to the Pulse night club shooting in a new or novel way? The data suggests so.

When I asked Kenneth if there was anything unexpected that came up for them in our interview they report:

Yeah, a lot of things were unexpected, I think that I have not really confronted a lot of my feelings about Pulse. I had confronted it, you know, again, when I was writing and performing that poem, then I stopped so I stopped dealing with them. So a lot of this conversation is bringing up stuff that I feel like sometimes that's like, out of touch with like a lot of things you asked about like action in the communities that I was a part of, or cold happened and stuff like that. And I felt distant and I also felt because of that distance, because of that distance I think almost like sort of the same guilt maybe that I saw when I lived in those places that I wasn't doing this thing.

When I present Nia with the same question, she narrates:

Um not surprising. I like, I said, I haven't had a conversation like this about [Pulse]. It's been very like, top, like it's a shallow matter, you know, not to sound bleak. But there's no other way to start because we can see what we're talking about, right? We didn't get deep enough. We talked about the Bear Lake, okay, it's above water, we can talk about that. So here you can see, like, right here we talked about that but once it started getting dark, no one really wanted to talk about it. Right. And that's the stuff we didn't delve into. So being able to have that and have this you know, ability to express it and discuss it and talk about the deep stuff is good and it's needed and it's a cathartic.

When I ask Sandra if there is anything else she would like to say about our interview she responds with:

It was super educational about what I thought! I feel like I haven't touched on any of this since it happened. Yeah, I don't think about a lot and I chose not to. And I feel like when people do this similar thing they chose not to think about a lot unless they are directly impacted. It was strictly someone that they loved that died. And they have to think about every day, I don't really have to think about it every day, except for when I'm in Boycott for that one second and I think about that shooting. And that's a shame. You know, I should be trying to, like, get better at, like, making myself more aware. But like, also, like, I burn my feelings. She's the feelings person. I'm the businessperson.

The last part of Sandra's comment, she turns to her partner JJ and they share a moment of laughter together. Sitting in the moment of mutual recognition and self-reflection, the partners longingly gaze at one another. Happy for this moment. Rodney, too, expresses the satisfied feeling he is experiencing towards the end of our interview. He says:

It was really nice to self-reflect and like, kind of connect all the pieces together, of my own experiences, my own identity. How, like, my struggles played a role into how I feel [Pulse] Like, what did I experience that made me feel like a very certain type of way?

Daniel answers succinctly when I ask him the same question, "When you ask about conversations, after Pulse, I was surprised at how emotionally affected I was by remembering just how open and thoughtful people were right after pulse." Recently, I was chatting on Instagram with Daniel, who I still keep in contact with about a year after our formal interview ended. I was venting to Daniel about having to comb through transcriptions of data and the emotional labor a project like this takes. He offered condolences and added, "I think about sometimes about how my trans students give me hope for a new way of being in queer community, and how I didn't understand our relationship that way until you asked me what gave me hope."

"Queerness is not yet here," Muñoz (2006) pens: "Queerness is an ideality. Put another way, we are not yet queer. We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of horizon imbued with potentiality" (p. 1). Throughout his work, Muñoz theorizes performances of disidentification that begin as critical survival strategies for the minoritarian subject. It is difficult to be a queer or trans body of color in Phoenix; thus, when an unprecedented act of violence even like Pulse occurs, even though it is clear across the country, the minoritarian subject in Arizona becomes hyper

visible. Hyper visibility leads to hyper vulnerability. And to cope with such vulnerability, queer and/or trans bodies of color must take the necessary steps to ensure their survival. The interviews we conducted together, however, gave us all a chance to sit and in community with one another, to mourn, and to experience the powerful mechanism of melancholia that Muñoz so rightfully pointed out as critical for understanding our formation *as* minoritarian subjects. With this in mind, the interview becomes not just a recording and a transcription of the facts, it becomes a vehicle to drive each of us closer to the horizon; the interview is not simply a text that records data, it is a corporeal text that functions outside of the context of academic labor. It helps to reconcile and mend the rupture Pulse created for queer and/or trans folks of color. The interview is a second rupture, one that leads to “reformatting of self within the social” (Muñoz, 1999, p. 74).

(Fantastical) Intersectionality in Gender Studies

I was nervous. And when I am nervous, I sweat. Usually, I then get nervous about being sweaty. No one likes a sweaty person on the first day of class. I was nervous because I had never taken a gender studies course before. As other students filed into the classroom, I remember thinking two things. First, gazing around at a group of strangers thrust me in into a feeling of uneasiness. An uneasiness that is imbued with potentiality. What might be able to theorize together? Dream to together? Second, the bodies around me did not resemble the bodies in my own department. Black, Brown, queer, international and disabled bodies filled the seats around me. To be clear, it is not that these bodies do not exist in my department, or even in our field, but their scarcity is abundant. I wondered what this experience would be like.

As it grew closer for class to begin, my anxiousness continued. This class had been recommended to me by my advisor after I came to him with the frustration I was feeling with our department and our discipline. He advised me to take a course with a new faculty member on campus, Marlon M. Bailey. Being relatively new to critical theory outside of the communication discipline, I had spent the summer reviewing Bailey's work. I was elated to be in a classroom with a person who wrote a book about the ballroom culture, who wrote so unabashedly about sex, and who wrote in a way that centered their own body. I was ready to meet this human. Bailey entered the classroom space and began chatting with some of the students he knew. I watched his every move, the way he spoke, how he held himself. As he went over the syllabus, he made clear that the focus of this class would be women and queers of color; the books and theories we were to engage were written by authors who centered intersectional thought because of their own lived experiences. Race, gender, and sexuality were not variables to be added to the analysis; they were the foundation of the analysis. I was floored as Bailey continues to go over our goals this semester. Not only was it the first time in my educational career that a queer person of color was standing in front of the classroom, it was also the first time I found a homeplace in a classroom (hooks, 1994) or what Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) would call the Coatlicue state. A state where one is scene and no longer feels alone. I and all the other students who occupied difference were to be guided through material we were so desperately craving.

Today, I would describe Bailey as someone who embodies the ontology of intersectionality. What I found in that initial class of Bailey's was something I had not yet encountered in my communication studies education—an embrace of how race, gender,

and sexuality, for example, intersect and constitute one another. Identity categories are not simply boxes to check while doing research. And reflexivity is not simply an act of naming your social location but rather a critical investment in understanding your role in practice, discourse and scholarship. This dissertation, and particularly this analysis chapter, is written in a such a way to honor the lessons taught to me by Bailey: to embrace complexity, to be self-reflexive, and let others speak for themselves. Yet further, it also contributes to communication studies were there is still a large need for more scholarship and pedagogy that shares the critical commitments put forward by queer and/or trans scholars of color. Communication studies has a whiteness problem (Chakravartty, Kuo, Grubbs, & McIlwain, 2018), it reflects similarly to the whiteness interlocutors experience. However, the queer and/or trans of color worldmaking detailed in the next section provide approaches to how to combat whiteness. We, communication studies, should follow their lead.

Queer and/or Trans of Color Worldmaking

Queer and/or trans of color worldmaking refers to the ways in which minoritarian subjects create temporal, spatial, and ephemeral strategies of resistance from white, cis-hetero/homonormative oppressive conditions (Gutierrez-Perez & Andrade, 2018). Muñoz (1999) explicates worldmaking through which performances hold the ability to create alternative and non-normative views of the world. Resisting legibility through normative structures, queer and/or trans of color worldmaking is necessarily an embodied and reflexive process that holds endless possibilities for discovering new subject coalitions. Yep (2003) argues that it is necessary for communication studies to integrate worldmaking both theoretically and pragmatically in order to combat the violence felt in

our discipline and our own bodies. For Goltz and Zingsheim (2015), worldmaking is enacted through a politic of queer relationality. Reimagining how to be queerly in relation with one another, they argue, goes beyond an abstract theoretical understanding of worldmaking because with relationality so to comes materiality. With this in mind, the following sections will explicate two distinct areas of queer and/or trans of color worldmaking: (1) the house party, the sober space, and the not gay bar and (2) artistic practice as praxis.

The House Party, the Sober Space, and the Not Gay Bar

Radical house parties have always been pillars in Black and Brown queer and trans communities, specifically (Chambers-Letson, 2018). The party is a sight of celebration and refuge, and simultaneously serves as a shelter for revolutionary planning. It is a way of staying alive. For instance, Darius explains how the house parties in Phoenix keep them feeling safe in the face of the unrelenting whiteness in Phoenix queer community. They explain:

I'll just go to my house music clubs and dance party, which is what I like to do. So I find myself going to those clubs more because I like the music and what not. And I like the environment more than kind of be dominated by the white queerness of [the bar] Charlie's.

Rodney expresses similar relief, not having to worry about being surveilled for particular behaviors or forms of dress; normative expectations of clubs. He shares:

It's strange that I say that because most of the nights that I've had with like, my gay crew, it's usually been like whether we go to somebody's house to bring food. Not all my friends smoke but the ones that do we kind of, we just kind of vibe. So if I can have a space where I to just show, I don't got to worry about the slutty edge. I can just come in my sweatpants. I don't know just kind of be like, I don't know, like normal just kind of just like, you know, do your thing.

Both interlocutors provide example of why house parties are more desirable spaces for their bodies. Particularly after Pulse, house parties provide interlocutors sense of security (albeit not total security) that a public club or bar may not.

Bendix (2019) argues that the gay bar has been the epicenter of radical queer ideas for decades. She mentions further, gay cafes and bookstores have also been important to queer history but are often times hard to sustain. The gay bar is just that: a bar. And as Bendix continues, bars usually only offer conversation paired with one other activity: drinking. Generally, queer and/or trans folks are more at risk for addiction and substance abuse issues. Combined further with the fact people of color are also disproportionately affected by the same issues, it is no surprise that interlocutors identified the need for sober spaces for queer and/or trans people of color. For example, Kenneth identified a desire for spaces for people to have options, stating:

I think it would be cool to have a space that was like maybe not always alcohol, alcohol wasn't always allowed. I guess what I'm thinking of maybe a venue, and some of the events could have alcohol and some of them could not, you know. I think that's important to not have all the spaces be like clubs and bars and places where people go to get drunk.

Expressing the need for varied activities and organizing practices, Kenneth also demonstrates care to members of his own community who make the choice not to drink. Jordan, however, details a far more material consequence to only having spaces in which drink alcohol. When I ask Jordan what kind of queer space they would like to see built, they respond with a coffee shop. When I ask why they note:

Because there aren't enough your spaces that are open late that don't serve alcohol. I've been sober for 10 and a half years. Yeah. So, like, I don't mind going into alcohol filled spaces, because that's where the people that I love are. However, I also know that there are people in our community who struggle with

addiction and having a place where they don't have to be presented with the option of buying a drink or getting out.

By using themselves as an example, Jordan clearly articulates there are bar and club spaces that will refuse to accept costumers who refuse to purchase alcohol. Jordan raises the point, if the queer bar is a refuge, what happens to those who refuse in participate in the ritualist drinking that required to be a refugee? The desire for queer nightlife spaces that welcome and take in people who choose to be sober highlights Kenneth's and Jordan's commitments to community building built upon mutual values and respect for different types of lifestyles.

Although I have experienced much of what Phoenix gay bars have to offer, I spend most of my time in bars that cater to queer folks yet do not consider themselves to be gay bars in any official capacity. Daniel's description is best when he describes the going out practices of his friend group:

We go to we mostly go to joints that are like. So, you know how there's like gay bars. And then there's places like Carly's and Hanny's that aren't gay but are very gay. Yes, yes. We spend a lot of time at those. Yes, that's where I spend a lot of my time. Yeah.

These non-queer spaces are where I first met Daniel. An environment that let us forge a relationship through conversation. The divey nature of our favorite haunt makes the space feel malleable, a welcome queer presence with often less infiltrations of whiteness.

Indeed, I also met Sandra at one of these non-queer spaces. She describes how these spaces make her feel safe when she says:

I feel like a lot of the places that I do frequent have a lot of queer people, but it's not a queer space. Like this is one of them Welcome Diner. Let's just take this restaurant, for instance, most of the people are either people of color or people of color who are queer, or queer people. People who know I'm queer. Yeah. So like, they're familiar with me, I know that I will come here and be welcomed with open

arms. It is a safe space, and it has been a safe space. Jobot¹². Many queer people there, and I've been going there for years. They know I'm queer. They see me and JJ.

From our testimony and presence, these bars and spaces become our own refuge. While the space matters, the space also does not matter. The space is transformed into what we, the queer patrons, make of it. It can be the place where we flirt with one another till last call. The place where we argue about the weather or not one can be queer and belong to organized religion harmoniously. Or it can be the space where a young scholar conducts five interviews for his doctoral dissertation. The spaces are imbued with our minoritarian world making, providing us thoughts on what constitutes a queer and/or trans of color method. All of the performances and desires detailed in this section point to moments of queer and/or trans of color worldmaking that allow us to survive our mundane lives and make the horizon of the future seem brighter.

Artistic Practice as Praxis

Similarly to how Smith (2019) utilizes creative and artistic practice to produce scholarly work, interlocutors demonstrated the importance of artistic practice to imagining queer and/or trans of color futures. For instance, I first met Liliana at an open mic at Kobalt in central Phoenix. I was performing an excerpt from this document, and she was performing an original song that featured her guitar and vocal skills. Liliana and I got acquainted after the show which is when she agreed to be interviewed. Recognizing our mutual desire to create meaning/worlds through art and performance, we found ourselves coming together through a mutual recognition of art as praxis.

¹² Jobot is a hybrid bar, coffee shop, restaurant in central Phoenix

As mentioned previously, Kenneth, initially attempted to work through their own feelings about the events that happened at Pulse night club through original spoken word poetry. They describe their piece as:

And I talked about, you know, sort of, I guess, the reality of my body being Black and non-binary, and bisexual. And, you know, I'm just, it's just, uhh I am at risk from so many hateful choices in the world. So, it just kind of confirms that, and also tries to, you know, at least combat some of that by acknowledging that. The importance of joy, I think, to myself, in the face of all of that potential death.

Here, Kenneth demonstrates how art not only is utilized to work through trauma or pain; rather, it becomes the vehicle for what Smith calls “intersectionality-as-artistic-method” (p. 209), where the artist/scholar/activist fuse methods of creativity and thought produce new knowledge and potential futures.

Several months after my interview with Anthony, a queer, Latinx man. I ran into him at an open mic night at a local bookstore. I was performing a new section of this project, hoping to hear some thoughts from the community. Performing right after me was Anthony. During his interview, Anthony, an award-winning playwright, told the story of living in New York City with his white partner at the time. The evening that the events occurred at Pulse, Anthony and his partner fought relentlessly about the politics of visibility surrounding Pulse; about who got to claim the trauma for their own; what it means to be marginalized as a (non)-white queer person. The fight would be the catalyst for the ultimate end of their relationship. This evening, Anthony walks up to the microphone and introduces himself. He says, “hello everybody my name is Anthony and I wrote this piece after doing an interview a few months ago about the Pulse nightclub

shooting.” I listen as he delivers a beautifully dramatized version of the deeply personal narrative he shared with me. More aptly, I have now been researching, writing, and performing about Pulse for over eight months now. It is exhausting and rewarding to continue to be in the front of rooms performing about something I care so deeply about that so many, particularly in Phoenix, seem to have forgotten about. It feels like a labor I have taken on by myself. Sometimes I wonder if anyone else cares. But not tonight. If I were not here tonight, Anthony would have been spreading a message about Pulse tonight. Perhaps providing the catalyst for melancholia for a different audience of queer and/or trans folks of color than I could ever reach. The interview Anthony and I recorded never saved properly in a digital format. Thousands of two second audio clips out of sequence litter the folder with his name on it on my hard drive. The time we spent together never recorded ‘properly.’ Although I still remember the way he played with his hat when he got nervous or was searching for answer. The way he passionately described the relief efforts and mobilizing on the ground that happened in New York immediately following the shooting. The drinks we ordered at last call long after the recording ended. Watching Anthony perform tonight, I made the choice to not re-interview him. To let the ephemerality of our interview live in our bodies and the digital dump where I gently placed his audio clips. The art we made was our praxis, both together and individually. I started this project wondering
How could I possibly ask folx to share
Their stories of
Pulse
Their pulse.

Now I wonder

How could I possibly not have?

CHAPTER 5
AND WE DANCE

Verse

I begin this chapter with a question. A question that has been asked by many—interlocutors, colleagues, friends, and strangers. Why am I doing research about the Pulse nightclub shooting in Phoenix? I have two answers to this question: first, I am not doing research about the Pulse nightclub shooting. The research in this document is about people. About bodies. Queer and trans bodies. Bodies of color. Our bodies congregate in Phoenix; where we live, work, and experience a felt sense of the corporeal nature of how our bodies move through the world. Pulse is, of course, at the center of the research because how our bodies move has changed since June 12, 2016. But this dissertation is not *about* Pulse. It is about a community of queer and/or trans people of color who are surviving in a world that renders our bodies as disposable.

To begin the second answer, I draw on dance scholar Clare Croft, who writes in the introduction to her book *Queer Dance* (2017):

The ways power moves and takes hold in dancing can only be understood by attending to the vantage point from which one considers joining the dancing.

What makes some feel comfortable jumping into the mix leads others to opt out.

A map of queer dance has to consider Arizona and Alabama as potentially hosting as much queer dance as New York or San Francisco are assumed to do. (p. 7)

Her words point to several reasons as to why this research was completed in Phoenix.

Initially, our vantage point is important. Four years later, discourse and debates flourish in Orlando about what the events at Pulse nightclub mean to their community.

Government agents, community members, and survivors about what to do with the land that Pulse was on (Community Coalition Against a Pulse Memorial, 2019), for example. Gun laws are ongoing. Discussion about gun laws continue to be had (Ray, 2020). And the (queer) family of those that were lost are still mourning. But as Croft suggests, we need to, first, emphasize that the event creates repercussions beyond the Orlando community and, second, consider those repercussions as holding as much weight as those within Florida. Arizona may be on the periphery; it is time it be moved to the center.

A guiding question to this dissertation is, how do minoritarian subjects utilize performance to resist against the conditions of oppression that made the massacre at Pulse possible? It seems only fitting to attend to this question by utilizing what we do in the club, queerly dance, as a way to understand how the performative afterlife manifests. Croft (2017) analyzes dance as a way to study, understand, and do queerness. She writes, “*Queer Dance* focuses on what queer does, rather than imagining queer as having an essential referent or marker within an individual or a relationship” (p. 9). This approach to queerness is quite fitting for this dissertation. Essentially, this research examines what Pulse does. Further, however, dance is a uniquely appropriate vehicle to understand this research. Pulse nightclub was a place that people went to dance. They came to forget. To flirt. To fuck. Queer dance scholars have well documented how dancing, inside or outside the club, is a way to imagine new worlds and ways of being (Briginshaw, 2001; defrantz, 2002; Salvigliano, 2010). They argue queer and trans people can take the ephemeral moments on the dance floor, carry them, and hold onto them for when the world feels like too much. Croft (2017) furthers queer dance as a critical project, as a critical project, queer dance must emphasize and embrace anti-racist, anti-cissexist logics, and a

commitment to feminism and non-normativity. In this way, queer dance is not just an act; it is a theoretical and material project that is committed to ways of moving and being that challenge power. The same power that created the conditions for what occurred at Pulse.

I ask Kenneth why they enjoy being at the club. “I don’t I’m not even sure...It just feels like a weightlessness. Um, like, whatever was holding me down before that moment, doesn’t really exist anymore?” I can feel them trying to grasp the words for the feelings in their body. The words are slippery, but the feelings are concrete. I ask Kenneth what about the club makes them feel like that. They pause.

I’m no longer worried about people’s eyes on me and people judging me and things like that. I know, that obviously, could still happen in those spaces for different reasons. Just because, you know, I’m in a gay space doesn’t mean like, it’s all good. But I think that like being in that space and just knowing that, at least, like, you know, non-heteronormativity is accepted there, that I can just kind of rest easy you know. [chuckles] Just like, let my guard down a little bit. Um. And, and have fun. Dance. And Yeah. Mostly just dance. It’s like, you know, the physical release of stress, and the experience of happiness, that, that I feel when I dance is really important to me. And I think like, being in a body that is masculine, like, you know, there’s a lot of like societal rules about when and where and how I can dance. To step away from all those things...um. It feels great.

I pause. Kenneth opted for a phone interview, but I see them in this moment. I think about the moment when I hear the high pitch beginning of Lizzo’s “*Cuz I Love You*.” How I rush to the floor and move my body. I pretend to have all eyes on me and simultaneously look at nobody. The power of my movement feeds me. I know exactly what Kenneth is telling me. I tell him that’s beautiful. And that I relate to a lot of what they just said. Maybe I’ll go dancing tonight.

The intimacies of queer dance are in many ways where this project starts and ends. The people lost at Pulse were there to dance; it seems only fitting we should dance with them now. To that end, this concluding chapter highlights what the performative afterlife Pulse does through the metaphorical and the material vehicle of queer dance. In this chapter, I explore theoretical, pedagogical, methodological, and disciplinary implications this research highlights. Dance becomes the critical through-thread that strings these implications together.

Chorus

I am back in Salt Lake City again. The first time since I have been here since last summer. It has been less than a year since June 12, 2016. We meet at a quiet hotel bar in a group of friends. I have never met you, but I am immediately drawn to you. You are handsome with a charming smile. You are well liked and kind to your friends. You make a point to introduce yourself to me since we have never met. You are gentle and generous with me, an introvert by nature who needs a bit of an adjusting period in large group settings with new people. You seem to take me in, all of me. I do the same to you. You leave to go greet another friend of yours and I watch you walk away. I start a conversation with my friend, but I keep a watchful eye on you. Or rather, I really cannot bring myself to look away.

When everyone confirms that our group is complete, we make our way outside. Salt Lake City is frigid on February night, but the walk wakes me up. The harsh wind hits my face and it reminds me that I am alive. I never really been out in Salt Lake before, but a group member guarantees me the club we are going to is fun. The cold of the outside

creates a heightened anticipation for the crowdedness of the club, filled with sweat and bodies. I watch you at the front of the pack, helping to lead the way. Leadership looks good on you, I think. We arrive quickly; the walk was only a few blocks. Its crowded. And loud. The walls, floor, and bar are glowing with lights built into them. One might describe it as rainbowy. This is what I wanted. This is what I needed, being back in this city again. I need to make some new memories. I need to celebrate. I need to dance.

I make it a point to stand next to you at the bar. You notice. You buy me a drink. We move to the floor. I turn to my friend who is dancing beside me. I do not have to say anything to him for him to know I am trying to take you home tonight. He nods his head, he approves. We dance. We all dance, the whole group for hours. I dance with strangers, with new and old friends, and with you. I move my body into contortions, making tableaux with myself that line the future world I see myself in. I want you to come with me. At the end of the night, I watch you take someone you met at the club back to your hotel room. I walk home with my friend, a bit disappointed, mostly tired and in state of half drunkenness. He says maybe next time.

He was right. The next day you find me and ask me to dinner. When I meet you at your door that night, you invite me in. We never make it to dinner. Our Brown bodies swirl for hours. I fall in love with you that night. I think you fall in love with me too. I wake up with you holding me in the morning. I do not wake up alone or to tragic news. This city has more of a story now. A place with loss but with so much more life.

Three years later I still love you. Although sometimes I cannot stand you. But I love you. We call. Text. We make it a point to spend time with one another at least once a year. We share our struggles, personal and professional. We celebrate our victories and

special occasions. Together, we create our own ways of being with one another.

Together, we dance through life and make sure we survive through it. When I call you to tell you how to this dissertation is taking everything out of me, how I am tired of listening to the interviews with my interlocutors, how I no longer know if I can write through my own feelings, you listen. You let me vent. You let me cry. You reassure me this work is important. Most importantly, you share with me how Pulse sits with you. I share the same with you. Pulse sits with us. We dance with it.

Performance studies scholars Felipe Cervera and Eero Laine (2020) argue that performance studies methodologies are at a collaborative turn. That is, they argue that the everyday is marked by collaborative possibilities by those who share a sense of labor and common understanding of performance studies. More specifically, they suggest collaborative methodologies create an opportunity for a collective approach to performance studies research and scholarship, one that values connection and the possibilities of a shared performances or methodologies not possible with only one body. Similarly, Dwight Conquergood (2013) argues that a dialogic approach to interviewing means creates the opportunity for researcher and interlocutor to create new knowledge together, challenging the transactional model of knowledge and emphasizing a collective onto-epistemological orientation: a co-performance of witnessing. Together these scholars demonstrate the necessity of collaboration and collectivity as central to both knowledge and performance. With one of the guiding questions for this project in mind, how do minoritarian subjects understand and perform their lives in the wake of Pulse, as I

consider what the performative afterlife of Pulse is or does, it seems critical to understand such an afterlife as a co-performance.

As I try to untangle exactly what a performative afterlife is, I am reminded that queer dance (and queer orientations to knowledge and research, generally) leans into the slippery nature of what something is or can be (Croft, 2017). With its poetics, queer dance often fails to convey direct meaning. In this way, queer dance flirts with queer's messiness. Dance never does one thing or means one thing. As Croft writes, "by embracing a messy, heterogeneous, even possibly contradictory queer, dance forges community, not in spite of, but through and with challenges and contradictions" (p. 10). I take this approach to understanding what the performative afterlife is and is not. As I come to understand the performative afterlife as a co-performance, however, a co-performer is not always physically present. For instance, one may decide to volunteer at a local organization after the events at Pulse, like Sammy did. This is, undoubtedly, an example of what the performative afterlife can be. In fact, Sammy's willingness to volunteer will have lasting material effects on the community in Phoenix. However, I find the most interesting and fruitful place to discover the potentiality of a performative afterlife is in between concrete moments of action or behavior. How the afterlife exists in between bodies. Of course, deciding not to go to a discotheque because of a feeling of unsafety is, again, a concrete example of how an affect materializes into a behavior. But I am more interested in the innocuous, the moments that are so fleeting they are almost too slippery to recall or describe. The performative afterlife of Pulse was present in every interview I did for this dissertation. A felt presence, it allowed me and the interlocutors to connect with one another and to muddle our way through conversations about an event

we continue to struggle to make sense of or be at peace with. It is the moment of silent reflection as we think of what to say next. It is the hug we share afterwards. It is most definitely the laughs we have with one another. Whatever its form, it is not possible without one another. The co-performative afterlife I experienced with each person was never the same, yet it always had a familiar quality. It is a dance. The Cumbia is always a Cumbia, but no Cumbia is ever the same. These interviews shape how we move through the world after they are complete. As Conquergood (2013) suggests, we carry lives with us before and after the research process. We are no longer the same as we were before we did them. For queer and/or trans folks of color, then, Pulse's performative afterlife is a corporeal way of being and moving through the world, a performance that is deeply connected to those who share and shape our relationship with the events that happened at Pulse, and a way of being that is audienced by many who render our bodies less than. The afterlife is about how we trudge on after Pulse.

The performative afterlife of Pulse is not always at the forefront of our mind or even the strongest force guiding how we move through the world; however, it is always present. Therefore, as women of color feminists would argue, context is critical to our understanding of what the performative afterlife is (Collins & Bilge, 2016; May 2015). The location of our interviews deeply informed how we co-performed the afterlife. Diana and I did our interview in my office on campus during a weekend. Diana and I have a relationship; we have created a few performances together for a local performance troupe we are both a part of. Therefore, I know that how we co-performed the afterlife was unusual. Perhaps, more aptly, the afterlife was sterile and stale. Our interview was in no way flawed. It yielded a fine recording and transcript, and we completed all of the

questions I wanted to ask. But the dinge and musk of my empty office in the building on campus colored the afterlife as grimy. I can hear how lifeless we sound confined in my office. I know Diana and their spirit, and I know my own voice: the context of academia sucked the soul out of both. As I mention in chapter 3, interviews are not only what we capture on tape. The context of the people, place, and subject matter are hard to capture on audio recording yet provide a rich point of analysis for considering nuanced forms of qualitative methods.

The performative afterlife is not to be simply be studied and theorized about; it is meant to be done. It is about doing. When interlocutors and I met in spaces where things happen, particularly bars, the afterlife flourished in a constellation of color. Indeed, Phoenix itself is an important context for understanding the performative afterlife of Pulse. The community of Phoenix is unique, equipped with its own sets of challenges and benefits. Interlocutors point to issues like the high rate of undocumented people who are part of the queer community, for example. If research is to continue on performative afterlives, it is imperative the approach must include deep contextualization into specific communities. Phoenix is not San Francisco or New York or Billings. Queer and/or trans people of color live in all of these places but the way they perform, the way they move, does not look the same.

Bridge

It is the first time I am teaching a class called “Performance of Literature Written by Women.” The class is nearly two thirds complete. It has been a rewarding and challenging semester; I have been inspired by the students in our classroom and critically self-reflexive throughout the semester. I have been attempting to understand what it

means to teach a class that asks students to embody the experiences of women while I, as the instructor, do not identify as a woman. The entire semester I have offered an open invitation for the women in class to discuss with me publicly or privately any suggestions, critiques, and conversation. My goal has always been to center the bodies, voices, and experiences of women. In this last unit, we are reading a short play by a Black faculty member in our department which describe the racism she experienced in her ballerina training as a child. The text is inextricably linked to dance as a material and metaphorical vehicle for how bodies “do” in the world. Because the body is central to dance, I switch up the ritual of a playing a song over the speakers as we wait for class to start. Today I drop the lights and put the projection screen down as students start to file into the classroom. I pull up the music video for “*Hijos del Peligro*” by (Me Llamo) Sebastián and press play.

The music video is a difficult one. It is a reimagination and recreation of the massacre that happened at Pulse. It begins by following two men as they go about their days. The screen is split so you can watch how their days parallel one another; one man dressed in mostly blue, the other in mostly red. Both men of color, the audience follows them until both men end up at the same club. The split screen ends and both men are in the same crowded and sweaty group of dancing patrons. The two men slowly make their way toward one another in the center of the dancefloor. The screen then begins to flash between a red and blue hue. When the screen is red, the two men move towards one another, one tenderly grabs the others beard, their faces slowly become closer, and the men passionately kiss one another. When the screen is blue, the two men move towards one another, one tenderly grabs the others beard, their faces slowly become closer, and

one man pulls a gun out and shoots the other in the stomach. The video continues flashing between these two worlds; between reality and fantasy. In blue world, the man continues to violently shoot and kill other dancers. In the red world, he kisses the same dancers. The video is hauntingly beautiful, it is as sad as it is hopeful. Sensual as it is cruel.

As I press play, I am nervous. I am conscious that this video features two men, I am worried I am not sticking to my commitment. Yet further, I am nervous about students will react to video. I have never facilitated a conversation about Pulse in the classroom, I am not sure I am prepared. Students are generally quiet through the first half of the video; some are too bored to look up from their phones. As the first shot gets fired, I hear “Is this Pulse?!” from a student. I tear my eyes away from the screen to identify who said it. A straight white man, who I have had rocky conversations about feminism with all semester. I am surprised. His comment spurs people to look at the screen. Reactions start and they are audible. Short “oh my god” or “what is happening.” By the end of the video, it seems that everyone is transfixed on the screen. I turn off the project, push up the screen, and sit in front of the class in silence. “What was that?” someone says. Their tone is not combative but rather curious with a bit of hesitance thrown in. I say since we are talking about the body and dance today, I wanted to share with you a video that makes me think about the power of dancing quite a bit. What follows is a conversation about Pulse, dance, clubs, violence, guns, safety, lust, and performance. It is impossible to narrow down what the conversation is about because it is really about all of those things all at one time. Each topic spills into one another one, we circle back to where we were before but this time, we take it a different direction. That is how our day is spent together. That is what we learn today.

Fawaz (2016) uses the metaphor of the dancefloor to theorize a queer pedagogy. He argues that conceptualizing the dance floor is how students can have a sensual experience in the classroom, one that makes them desire both knowledge and bodies. A pedagogy that requires us engage in an ethic of care and openness with our students; one that does not shy away from messiness and resists conclusions. One that embraces conscious raising sessions. I take up Fawaz as I theorize and develop what I call a post-Pulse pedagogy, as I mention in chapter 3. Specifically, I wonder: how can one see the classroom as a dancefloor without acknowledging the necessity for dancing? Certainly, a dancefloor changes how a one might approach a classroom, but what are we doing once we begin our lesson that day? Are we simply regurgitating instructional practices that now feel out of place for our new “fun” setting? What, then, is the role of the instructor?

Dance scholar thomas f. defrantz (2017) writes from the position as a choreographer and argues:

like other choreographers, i make dances, but these works are usually open spaces that allow a group of collaborators to do what they want in response to the prompt of our shared labor. imagining a queer ground from which to move means that i work to reconfigure how a choreographer might be understood to function as the project figurehead, a choreographer is often conceived as a political leader with ultimate veto power, and the ability to engage violence (cutting entire sequences of movement) to define the state (the final dance). choreographers make casting and editing decisions; they might define movement sequences or offer them up from their own bodies. i claim the role of choreographer in SLIPPAGE projects, but i disidentify from that oddly patrician array of responsibility to mobilize artists from whom i want to learn in creative practice. together, we make dances that are undisciplined; dances that resist pre-determination, but wonder at what might come of shared wit and unusual alignments of material and physical ideas (p. 176)

defrantz's passage provides a blueprint for how instructors can understand their own position in a post-Pulse pedagogical framework. Indeed, acknowledging the political nature of our own bodies and positions is imperative. The classroom, like the club, is not apolitical. If, however, we are to acknowledge the power we carry with us, we take one step towards making our classroom dancefloors one where each person can dance equitably. defrantz also emphasizes pre-determination as part of the process of creating a queer dance. If we are to dance in our classrooms, therefore, it is necessary we too resist pre-determination. Letting go of what we think our classroom communities need and letting the communities identify those needs themselves.

Dance scholar and choreographer Pete Carpenter (2017) further argues to dance queerly provides a lens through which to see how bodies have agency. Carpenter identifies as a white, gay male, with a privileged body. He writes from this vantage point and emphases, "when I dance queerly I remember the political limits of dancing alone" (p. 205). This powerful passage is a reminder that queer dancing necessitates a politic of including bodies that continue to rupture the normativity of a dancefloor. Bodies that will always move differently than your own. I argue a post-Pulse pedagogy must follow suit with Carpenter and must engage in critical self-reflexive practices of what bodies are present in the classroom. This, of course, goes beyond notice the bodies that are physically in the space of the classroom and speaks much more to what bodies we are engaging with in our classroom. Particularly, I wonder, how do we include, for instance, what knowledge interlocutors for this dissertation hold. Their words and experiences are not neatly detailed in academic texts. It is the role of the choreographer, the instructor, to center bodies like the bodies of interlocutors in this document in a classroom setting. Part

of this is corporeal; unlearning how we think we must conduct classroom sessions. To the mundane nature of the way that we sit in the classroom. To the more significant decision of what assessments look and feel like. Perhaps most critically, a post-Pulse pedagogy necessitates an acknowledgement of the bodies that are absent. Discussions must include the importance of power that made the make up our classrooms a particular way. It is one thing to program a play by a Black woman. It is quite another to discuss why there are none in class. A dancefloor is rendered useless without dancing. A post-Pulse pedagogy must include dancing. It is labor. It should make us tired, sweaty. It should take us through moments of discomfort. And when we finish it should fill us with joy. Perhaps the next day we are even a bit hungover. A post-Pulse pedagogy is a mechanism to lead students who see a dance floor at a club and join in.

Outro

It is Thursday. Daniel and I have plans tonight. Or more accurately, I hope Daniel shows up to the bar like he does every Thursday night. Daniel is not just an interlocutor. We met one night at the bar; he butted into conversations I was having with friends, a trait I now know is common for him. We debated or bickered or flirted, depending on who you ask. I asked him to participate in my dissertation research. That was over a year ago. I consider Daniel to be my friend; when I write about him in this dissertation, to identify him in relation to myself is slippery. We spend many nights together at our favorite local watering hole; detailing stories of our jobs, where we both work in higher education. Sharing tales of sex, intimacy, and romance, where we both mostly experience the joys failure. Commenting on our mundane experiences of being white-passing

Latinos in Phoenix, where we both feel and render our experiences as valid and real. I could use some of that conversation tonight.

I am in the middle of preparing for job interviews out of state and I want to talk about the things I am feeling with Daniel. While of course I am thrilled at the possibility of gainful employment, I am concerned about leaving the small community I have now made myself here. And how a lot of it seems to have happened through the process of writing and researching this dissertation. I feel committed to the people and the projects I have started here. What does it mean to leave them behind? I get to the bar about half past 7. Daniel is there, at his usual spot. I start to tell him about my day and my feelings and he listens. He listens until I run out of things to say. He does not offer advice. He only offers understanding. And as I finish, that portion of the conversation ends. We move on to another conversation, one about his day.

There is nothing particularly interesting about this story. Today is a regular Thursday. A mundane Thursday. A Thursday I had done before and will have again. It is, however, the mundane nature of this story and interaction with Daniel that is significant. Daniel and I are friends; we met through this research and now we enjoy each other's company. We go dancing together. One question guiding this study was how Pulse has shaped minoritarian subjects' relationships with others in their communities. In the case of Daniel and I, it forged a small community together.

Jennifer Monson (2017) writes about her process of a dance performer. A process that not only includes the audience but situates the audience as co-performer. Her goal is to foster an intimacy and a vulnerability between her and audience members that renders

them not just as bodies with a label of audience member or performer. Monson is attempting to foster a human connection between bodies to reach the experience of the “beyond-human” (p. 219). She writes that the beyond-human surges up through the dancing. Pulling her back to places she did not know she could go to. She argues in order to reach the beyond-human, the performer must push past their own ego to foster a level of vulnerability between everyone in the space. She writes, “The borders have been crossed in order to map out the possibility of mutually constitutive experience. It is a bit like building trust, but it is also like clearing the brush with a machete and we are taking turns with the swing” (p. 219). Similar to Monson, throughout this research I too attempted to tear down the walls between the borders of academic and interlocutor. Rooted in performance ethnographers’ approach to research (Conquergood, 2013; Madison 2012), interlocutors and I utilized dialogic witnessing to co-create knowledge with one another. However, Monson’s employment of border is a need addition to considering the methodological implications of this study. In particular, I argue, this dissertation illuminated the borderlands of interviews. Anzaldúa (1987) describes a borderland as a third space. A hybrid space, between cultures and social systems that is wrought by ambiguity. For Anzaldúa, a borderland lets a mestiza consciousness flourish, a way of being that embraces contradictions and ambiguities in order to reimagine a different social reality. As she explains:

La mestiza constantly has to shift out of habitual formations; from convergent move toward a single goal (a Western mode), to divergent thinking, characterized by movement away from set patterns and goals and towards a more whole perspective, one that includes rather than excludes (p. 101)

Ambiguity for Anzaldúa opens up the possibility for new modes and practices which challenge our preconceived beliefs about what can be. Indeed, I think the interviews I conducted in this dissertation highlight this in several ways. Through this dissertation, pinpointing the beginning and ending of each interview has proved difficult. Does my interview with Daniel start the day I met him or when I press the recording button? Does it end when we turn off the recording device or is its length not able to be determined because we have decided to continue to be in relationship with one another. And Daniel is not the only interlocutor I have extend my relationship with. They are my friends, colleagues, and artist collaborators. But if Pulse's performative afterlife is always present, when does the interview start and end? What is data and what no longer gets included? However, conceptualizing the interview as a borderland allows for the messiness of these relationships and privileges inclusion of data beyond the hour that is caught on tape. Broadening our horizons to who an interlocutor to be to a researcher and what an interview can look and feel like. The borderland of an interview asks us to lean into the ambiguity of our roles and the data points. Embracing the discomfort of not always knowing the correct answer in the pursuit of knowledge that is not hierarchical, that is localized, and that has utility beyond the academic text. If we, as Monson (2017) suggests, carry our machete with us to dance around the borderlands of the interview, what might we be able to create?

In *Decolonizing Ethnography: Undocumented Immigrants and New Directions in Social Science* (2019), Bejarano, Juárez, Mijangos García, and Goldstein write about the importance of community partners in ethnographic work. To accomplish their research, the authors partnered with community members who were embodied in community

organizations that advocated for the rights of undocumented people. Their methodological practices are rooted in activist work and argue an activist orientation towards ethnographic field methods can work to “build a collection of people who could struggle together to demand their rights” (p. 84). Indeed, a similar phenomenon occurred in the work done in this dissertation. The difference, however, was interlocutors and I created a community with each other through the process of this research rather than partnering with established community organizations. While ultimately, activism was not enacted from this particular study, it does show the how this particular methodology can lend itself to activist methodology. The promise of an activist methodology is one that will guide future projects of my own. Indeed, a staging of a community performance from research akin to this dissertation could provide a splendid and effective opportunity to begin activist organizing. If the researcher is willing to put aside their ego and allow for human to human experience, community build becomes possible. Indeed, this aligns well with how Chambers-Letson (2018) writes about what happens after the party. For the minoritarian subject, when the party dies down, the organizing begins. Dancing at Pulse is over, the interviews with interlocutors (may be) over. The next step lends itself to creating activism and advocacy.

Transdisciplinary artist and dance scholar Anna Martine Whitehead writes, “To exist outside the laws of capital—to be bold and creative and at-risk—are simultaneously life-affirming and indicative of potential social as well as corporeal death.... This development of the field facilitates our ability to safely express loss as an arts practice, even while it attempts to codify a gestural language that pivots on the wildness of danger and grief” (2017, p. 283). Her writing specifically interrogates the complications and

complexities of creating Black queer dance projects and occupying a Black queer body. Martine Whitehead furthers, the opportunity to work through the intricacies of producing Black queer art also reminds her that she is alive. And that the art she co-creates with other dancers and artists, even in the face of death, generates an occasion to imagine a future. Her work suggests the brightness of a queer imagining; one that does not forget the tragedy that has transpired. Martine Whitehead and her commitments inspires me to wonder what is next for this particular project and further projections of queer imagining still coming.

Perhaps most earnestly, this dissertation project demands a performative intervention. Madison (1999) explicates the potential of what a staged performance can offer a community. Particularly, she argues, “the performance of possibilities centers on the principle of transformation and transgression, dialogue and interrogation, as well as acceptance and imagination to build worlds that are possible” (p. 472). In other words, performance offers us an opportunity to visualize and dialogue about what may be possible. In the future, a staged version of this project will offer such an opportunity, for both an academic and non-academic audience. Further, this project would be enriched to do similar research in different geographies. As Croft (2017) writes, queer movement, cultural production, and dance look different in different locales. Moreover, Collins and Bilge (2016) note the importance of context when conducting intersectional research. What does Pulse’s performative afterlife look like in Baltimore, Fargo, or Chicago? Diving into the differences and complexities will only continue to enrich this project.

Further, this project is a mechanism to contribute to the field of communication studies in three ways. First, scholars in the field of communication studies widely

conceptualize communication as transactional. That is, a sender sends a message, a receiver acquires and processes it, and send a message back. However, the queer and trans of color communication practices documented in this dissertation push back on the idea of transactional communication practices. Nuanced meaning is found in a glance. A silence. The way someone says your name. Queer and trans of color communication may best be characterized as a constellation; deeply meaningful and connected, yet arbitrary and malleable. Second, several communication scholars have utilized the theoretical concept of disidentification in their work. In the future, this project lays a foundation to theorize how communication practices create conditions to change the minoritarian subject's relationship with a particular event or text. In this study, interlocutors indicated there was a lack of opportunities to talk, share, and feel about the events at Pulse. It was not until our interview, a communicative opportunity, their relationship with the event changed. Working through trauma and renegotiating how one disidentifies is made possible through our interaction. It is necessary to explore more fully what communication studies has to offer disidentification. Finally, this dissertation centers power, concept used frequently in communication studies but often without theoretical rigor. The ways in which power is felt and conceptualized in this project provides a framework for complicating and complexing communication studies' use of it. Power is not a mono-directional. Power does manifest the same across contexts and bodies. Power is not a resource that one day will run out. It is necessary to continue to theorize power in the context of communication studies.

Coda

This dissertation project centers the voices of queer and trans people of color. It responds to Calafell's (2016) call center queer and trans people in our discourse about Pulse. It centers their lives, their celebrations, and their losses. There is not a lack of minoritarian voices in the world, if one knows where to find them. There is, however, a lack of minoritarian voices in the field of communication studies. Whiteness plagues our discipline. And many of our critical conversations are still do not address cis-sexism, homophobia, disability, or western hegemony. White scholars in our discipline continue to make their voices the loudest in the room, shouting the names of Black trans women in a hollow display of what they believe intersectionality is (Masri, 2019). The same white scholars continually say our discipline needs new onto-epistemological orientations that come from scholars of color. I want to ask these scholars: Have they ever talked to a Black trans woman? No, not in their classroom or at a conference. Have they gone to spaces and places where a Black trans woman is likely to be? Do they even know where that would be? I ask these questions because it is my opinion that if these scholars have talked to a Black trans woman, they would not need to call on scholars of color. I hope they would be able to see that new and revolutionary onto-epistemological orientations exist on the ground. People are performing them because they have always been performing them. One only needs to know where to look. This phenomenon is perhaps articulated best by Calvente, Calafell, and Chávez (2020) when they write:

How dare they perform solidarity with us when they not only stood by to witness faculty of color pushed out and get sick from the stress they and their colleagues have caused, but also have actively worked against faculty and students of color in their own institutions? How dare they in their own selfish opportunistic efforts to appear to be on the side of justice publicly shame distinguished scholars who have done more in the field for diversity and inclusion? (p. 6)

Diversity and inclusion are nothing more than performative opportunity if we still do not center the voices of those of us who are on the furthest margins. Until we start listening with and talking with to the people on the ground, who are not only academics, who live the lives so many “advocate” for with their scholarship, our discipline will continue to struggle. I believe this dissertation project is a significant and small step towards what our discipline could look like. It is significant because there is a dearth of this work in our field. Work that engages the actual bodies that scholars write about from afar. It is small because this is only of only hundreds of dissertations to be completed this year. We have so much farther to go.

Today is June 12, 2020.

The first time in three years I am not in Orlando.

The world is facing a global pandemic.

Black people are being slaughtered.

Revolutions are found in the streets of every state in the country.

I wish I could go dancing tonight.

It's 10:00pm and I light a candle, hit play on Marc Anthony's "*Vivir Mi Vida*."

It's a guilty pleasure of mine.

I dance in the living room.

In the bedroom.

The bathroom.

I dance because I do not know what else to do.

The journey of this document is almost complete.

The lives that are included in it,

Those are still dancing.

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APPENDIX A
RECRUITMENT SCRIPT

Are you a queer or trans person of color interested in sharing your thoughts/feelings about Pulse?

I am a PhD student studying Communication at Arizona State University. I am seeking queer and trans people of color for a research study (IRB approved) on their experiences with, responses to, or opinions about the Pulse nightclub shooting.

Participants will be asked to engage in a 1-hour audio recorded interview.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. For questions about this study, please contact me: michael.tristanojr@asu.edu or call at (630) 664-9010

Michael Tristano, M.S.

Hugh Downs School of Human Communication

APPENDIX B
INTERVIEW GUIDE

Thank you for agreeing to do this interview.

- Are you at least 18 years of age? [If not, discontinue interview immediately].
- Do you understand your rights as a participant?
- Is it okay if I audio-record this interview?

I. Demographic Questions

1. Are you ready to begin?
2. How do you identify?

Prodding Questions:

3. How old are you?
4. What is your self-identified sexual orientation?
5. What is your ethnic and racial background?
6. What gender do you identify with? Can you provide a definition or description?
 - a. What are your preferred pronouns?

Transition: Now I am going to start by asking some questions about your response to Pulse.

II. Responses to Pulse

1. When you hear “Pulse” what immediately comes to mind? Is it a person, a story, a feeling? Can you describe what it is?
2. Where were you when you first heard about Pulse? Who were you with? What did you do? How did it feel?
3. In the days and weeks following Pulse, did you mourn? Where? How? With whom? How did it feel?
 - a) Do you feel like you are still mourning; can you tell me about this feeling?
4. Do you ever think about Pulse in your daily life now; do ever notice it in your thoughts? When? What are you doing? What does it feel like?
5. In the weeks and months following Pulse, did you take direct action or take to organizing of any kind? Why? Where? How? With whom? How did it feel?
 - a) Are you still organizing; how does this feel now?
6. In the days, weeks, and months following Pulse, do you remember how Pulse was being talked about by the media, on social media? What stories or images come to mind?
 - a) How did you feel about it was being talked about in the media, on social media, etc.?

Transition: For these next questions, think about the how your community has been impactful or important to you post Pulse.

III. Community

1. Have you felt a response from people you know in your own queer and trans of color communities? Why do you think you have or have not? If so, what has this response been? How does it make you feel?
2. Has Pulse changed the way you interact with your queer and trans of color communities? Why do you think it has or has not? If so, how has it changed? How does it make you feel?
3. Who have you talked about Pulse with outside your queer and trans of color communities?
 - a) With whom? How was it presented?
 - b) How did you feel about it?

Transition: For these next questions, I want to hear about your nightlife as a queer or trans person of color; feel free to tell me about both joys and woes you may have experienced.

IV. Queer of Color Nightlife

1. Tell me about your experiences with queer nightlife before Pulse: was it a big part of your life, where did you go, how often, how did it make you feel?
 - a) Do you have a favorite place to go? Where is it and why?
2. Tell me about your experiences with queer nightlife post Pulse: What has changed? Is it a part of your life still, where do you go, how often, how does it make you feel? Has the feeling changed, how so?
3. If you were to imagine a space of queer nightlife, what would it be like? Can you describe it? What does it look, sound, and feel like?

Transition: For these last questions, I want you to focus on the future. We live in a world where Pulse happened, so how do we move on?

V. Future

1. If you could decide how people remembered Pulse, how would it be?
2. What do you think the memory of Pulse will be like in 5 years?
3. How do you want to honor the memory of Pulse in your own life?
4. How do you feel about the future for queer and trans folks of color? What do you wish for? What are your biggest dreams and hopes for our communities?

VI. Closing questions

1. What else would you like to say about any of the things that we have discussed?

Unexpected

2. And In closing, what is it that you would want to say to your queer and trans of color communities in the wake of Pulse?

NOTE: This is a tentative interview format that indicates main areas of questions and includes probes as additional means to acquire more detailed and focused responses. The exact questions utilized will vary depending on how each co-participant's interview progresses, as the interview seeks to provide minimal structure on the participants' responses.

APPENDIX C
IRB APPROVAL

Daniel Brouwer
Human Communication, Hugh Downs School of
480/965-5976
Daniel.Brouwer@asu.edu

Dear Daniel Brouwer:

On 3/15/2019 the ASU IRB reviewed the following protocol:

Type of Review:	Initial Study
Title:	After the 49: Pulse's Performative Afterlife
Investigator:	Daniel Brouwer
IRB ID:	STUDY00009799
Funding:	None
Grant Title:	None
Grant ID:	None
Documents Reviewed:	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• After the 49 Recruitment, Category: Recruitment Materials;• After the 49: Pulse's Performative Afterlife, Category: IRB Protocol;• After the 49 Interview Guide, Category: Measures (Survey questions/Interview questions /interview guides/focus group questions);• After the 49 Consent, Category: Consent Form;

The IRB determined that the protocol is considered exempt pursuant to Federal Regulations 45CFR46 (2) Tests, surveys, interviews, or observation on 3/14/2019.

In conducting this protocol you are required to follow the requirements listed in the INVESTIGATOR MANUAL (HRP-103).

Sincerely,

IRB Administrator

cc: Michael Tristano Jr

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