# Being Underground

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis examines the social world of a Montreal music scene. Using the concept of scene as an organizing principal, I engage in an ethnography of the socio-cultural formation of the alternative techno scene. Methodologies of depth interviewing and sensuous ethnography are employed. Analysis of this data relies on affect theory and queer theory, and I incorporate thinking on the movement and intersection of socio-cultural forms within the social landscape. I argue that scene participants innovate by affirming and exploring affective and productive bonds that represent social and cultural otherness.

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# INTRODUCTION

## Interpretive Interest

Over the past two and a half years I have integrated into the social circles of Montreal's alternative techno scene. Via the networks of intersection known as 'chance' I matriculated into the MA Media Studies alongside a brilliant colleague who was herself also matriculating into a cohort of 20something queer women djing techno in Montreal. Our friendship made for a warm introduction to a social world and cherished audio/experiential memories of dance parties. Spending time in these spaces I super-attuned to a longstanding interest in the feelings that pool around dance floors. My memories of the spaces occupied by the scene are filled by many charged images, a register of exchanges between bodies alight with arousal, pulses of intensity with a brief half-life. These minor happenings are difficult to represent, but include gestures like warm glances between dancing strangers or appreciative yelps that ripple across a crowd. These descriptions, however, don't capture the flutter of spirit these action-experiences elicit. During these moments the shared intensity is unquestionable: I see it in the faces of others, and in their movements that seem at harmony with my internal world. I want to create an inventory of these moments, an itinerary of shared affects that lets me speculate on their movement, organization and the social possibilities they opportune.

My experience of this intoxicating affective fold is grounded by a recognition of the similarities between these dance floors and queer dance music experiences I've had in other cities, meta-experiences that leave identifying traces across media like Instagram, Facebook and zines where communication about/around the scene flourishes. This awareness has led me to seek out frameworks for locating these moments within an organized cultural matrix that produces recognizable experiences in disparate locales. The conditions experienced on dance floors are the result of specific social, material and cultural influences. These energies are at once ephemeral, novel, structured and recognizable. To account for these seemingly opposite movements I engage with scholarship that brings comprehension to the social world of the scene by complicating understandings of the experience and structure of social and cultural forms.

Most generally, this project is an account of the movement and the intersection of socio-cultural forms and the conditions experienced within Montreal's underground techno scene. Most specifically, it describes queer affects on techno dance floors and the social potential of these emergent affects. The organizing concept for the project, the scene, developed by communications scholar Will Straw, is a concept that describes practices occurring within specific social-cultural spaces. As Straw identifies, these practices interact with each other with differentiation and according to a variety of trajectories of change and cross-fertilization (Straw 1991 494). The focus of this MA thesis is the social processes within a specific scene, and it is therefore important to underscore that the effervescent and seemingly informal leisure scenes offer is not accidental but that, "scenes emerge from the excesses of sociability that surround the pursuit of interests, or which fuel ongoing innovation and experimentation within the cultural life of cities" (Straw 2013 412). The qualitative data used in this project, descriptions of the social and sensory experience of Montreal's alternative techno scene, was gathered through depth interviews, participant observation and sensuous ethnography. Theoretical analysis of these sources is supported by works on scenes, queer scenes, the circulation of cultural forms and, most comprehensively, affect.

This text is organized as follows. Chapter 1 plots a path from micro-sociological concepts developed at the Chicago School through the subcultures of the Birmingham School and into the contemporary work on cultural scenes as conceptualized by Will Straw. From there I explore the work of contemporary queer scholars who have modulated the scene to organize and analyze queer social lives. I incorporate thinking on the influence of socio-cultural forms within the scene, and how these forms cross bodies and spaces, to create, in the words of cultural theorists Dilip Gaonkar and Elizabeth Povinelli, "demanding environments" (2003 395). To attend to these interactions and the intensities circulating forms produce, and in order to follow the movement of queer energies within these environments, I include the affect theory of Kathleen Stewart. The chapter ends with an exploration of methodologies of interviewing and sensuous ethnography that are implemented to collect and organize data in Chapters 2 and 3. The dance floors of afterhours event spaces are the most intensive

sites for analyzing affect, and so this methodology is used to gather information directly from these sites and people that are knowledgeable of them.

Chapter 2 is an assemblage of interviews with four cultural producers within the scene (DJ's and event producers) interwoven with anecdotes I've heard from people in the scene over the course of two years in the field. With the help of the literatures detailed in Chapter 1, I develop an analysis of events and conditions in the local scene by parsing and categorizing interview data alongside other ethnographic writing about scenes, notably Benedicto (2014), Thornton (2013) and Taylor (2011). I also theorize about specific socio-cultural forms that overlap and produce the textures described in scene space. Finally I organize a framework for understanding the queer affect and activity that is pushing the scene in specific directions.

Chapter 3 is an immersive, first person account of the sites that initially drew me to this project, the parties that demanded my attention. Stepping into a party, I never fail to notice the density; the presence of specific objects and technologies of sensory intensity and the attention of participants directed towards the dance floor. That does something remarkable to space; it feels thick with human-ness, charged by the excitement of hedonistic sociability and the intimacy of recognizing your reactions on other people and theirs on you. Noticing a feeling on somebody else that feels so intimately 'yours' troubles the established boundaries of self and illuminates the movement of affective states that electrify bodies reproducibly. The materiality, the visuality, and the sonicity of the space are charged and apperceiving these conditions elicits arousal and reaction, but also the recognition that these events were designed to electrify certain affective circuits. In this final chapter the writing moves through descriptions of various phenomena and encounters, my memories from dance floors of the Montreal techno scene.

# CHAPTER 1
## Literature Review

The first half of this chapter engages academic work about quotidian socio-cultural formations, beginning with 20th century micro-sociological literatures that informed the subcultural work of British Cultural Studies, arriving at the more recent work on scenes within Cultural and Communication Studies. From this tradition I collect concepts to analyze a street-level socio-cultural body. I incorporate the concepts of cultural form and circulation and theories of affect and queer energy, followed by a practical methodological framework for undertaking an ethnography of the Montréal scene.

In the Montreal queer techno scene there are many collectives of DJs and promoters. They organize regular events that draw recognizable crowds, which retain some coherence across social forms, from ways of interacting at certain coffee shops and record stores, turns of phrase, aesthetics and styles of dancing. Will Straw defines scene as "designat[ing] particular clusters of social and cultural activity without specifying the nature of the boundaries which circumscribe them" (2013 412). With these scene experiences in mind, I follow queer affects that move through these registers of interaction. Bobby Benedicto defines affect as apparent in "moments when different circulations make an impact and give rise to the patterns of impulses and tones" (5). I value the emancipatory and optimistic definitions of queerness which run counter to the critique of queer transgression and resistance that Benedicto develops, so I will retain only his description of Manila queerness as producing affects that have a "yearning trajectory" (6), which is reminiscent of Muñoz's utopian definition of queerness explored later in this chapter. This analytic approach privileges street-level, intimate social relations and the cultures they produce – the proximally close (but not always) and colourful set of connections that make up and fill out personal lives. I read these relations between people as responsive to the pressures exerted by wider social relations exterior to the scene, and the power configuration that informs them. This chapter includes a methodology for an ethnography that is sensitive to the texture and feeling of things that fill out techno events, whether they are sweaty bodies, contested underground dance spaces or the sonic and visual profile of dance floors.

**Emergence of a Field of Study**

My project draws from subcultural studies, which according to Sarah Thornton, moves beyond the myopia of sociological and artistic traditions to "effectively conflate society and culture" (Thornton 2005 5). Texts compiled in *The Subcultures Reader* (2005) track the evolution of studies that attended to personal lives. Before this thinking took on the moniker of 'subculture', theorists in the social sciences began describing the micro-social (11). A century ago, the Chicago School of Sociology established a namesake in the young discipline of sociology through qualitative research that focused on people, pioneering the use of participant observation for studying matters of "conflict and control, network and segregation, vocation and lifestyle" (Thornton 2005 summarizing Park 1915). Notable milestones include Milton Gorden's emphatic validation of sociological interest in the personal and quotidian by describing this realm as, "a world within a world, so to speak, but it *is* a world" (1947 41). Similarly important, Albert Cohen's "A General Theory of Subcultures", written in 1955, would become foundational to the attention and concern of studies of the micro-social. In this text Cohen describes a gap between sociological and psychiatric literatures. He notes a lack of attention to "social structure and *the immediate social milieu* in determining the creation and selection of solutions" (46 emphasis added). Considering responses to structural issues encountered by certain individuals and groups in society, he describes a small 'cushion' of space that surrounds people in their intimate and social spheres, and analyzes the activities of people in commanding this arena, actors with "similar problems of adjustment", people who "slowly and incrementally build[ing] up a compromise sub-cultural formation" (49). The micro-social/subculture concept is developed with fellow Chicago school scholars like John Irwin (1970) and Howard Becker (1963). Becker's study is notable for its definition of 'hip' in comparison to the 'square' through an ethnography of jazz musicians. As Thornton opines, and Cohen's use of the phrase "problems of adjustment" suggests, the Chicago school situated the micro-social in relation to the natural correctness of hegemonic life ways, writing these social microcosms from a liberal or democratic perspective (2005). As the body of

literature diversified, analytical maturation made the concept attractive to researchers writing from other ideological positions.

Jock Young's (1971) analysis of play and hedonism in capitalist society pre-figured the subculture concept's adoption by writers of another ideological and continental perspective. Describing the social worlds of substance users from a neo-Marxist perspective, Young compares Marcuse (1956) and Marx (1938) through a dialectic on the conflict of productivity and consumption, the ouroboros-like nature of work and leisure, and the use of substances to intensify social pleasure by destabilizing workday social norms. This work helped resituate the micro-social or subcultural in relation to dominant or mainstream culture, moving away from a liberal-democratic perspective and towards the critical-Marxism that is credited with making the concept accessible to the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies (Thornton 2005).

At the Birmingham School, subculture was reformulated to critique class structure via the social organization and cultural expression of working class British youth, specifically the affinity groups they formed in response to alienation from parent and dominant cultures (Gelder 2005). In a theoretical work central to the School's approach to subculture, Clarke et al. describe youth subcultures in relation to Gramsci's concept of hegemony, or the affiliation and negotiation of power amongst ruling classes. This is theorized to occur by "inserting the subordinate class into key institutions and structures which support the power and social authority of the dominant order" (1975 102). Subcultures are described as providing street-level social and cultural outlets to working class youth for expressing energy accumulated through powerlessness, but no solution to their class disadvantage. Because the Birmingham subcultural approach asserts that subcultures do not have recourse for political agency through the subculture, authors like Dick Hebdige (1979) and Angela McRobbie (1989), describe the creative, stylistic or symbolic inter- and intra-group agency established by the youth subcultures. The subordinate classes, and most importantly their youth, bring a "repertoire of strategies and responses – ways of coping" which are realized as "concerns, activities, relationships, materials [that] become embodied in rituals of relationship and occasion and movement" (Clarke et al. 103-104).

**The Scene Concept**

In the 1980s and early 1990s there was further reformulation of the concept subculture, especially amongst scholars concerned with popular music studies and youth, who proposed alternative concepts like tribe, community and scene (Hesmondhalgh 2005 22). There was a dissatisfaction with the representational focus of subcultural work, and as Grossberg describes, a concomitant inability to "account for the reality and the generality of the affective power of music" (Grossberg 1984 447). He suggests that the disempowerment described by Birmingham subculturalists was ignorant of the affective, relational and productive capacity of groups of people that affiliate through taste, activity and cultural form. He describes that fans find themselves in contexts defined by their participation in subcultural formations where membership is defined by "affective investments rather than by semantic representations" (478). These investments lead to affective alliances, "an organization of concrete material practices and events, cultural forms and social experience which both opens up and structures the space of our affective investments in the world" (478).

Later still, Barry Shanks (1988) and Will Straw (1991) developed the concept of scene, borrowing the vernacular term to organize musical practices to differing ends (Hesmondhalgh 2005). This project will follow from the conceptual lineage of scene initiated by Straw, who conceived of the scene for analyzing 'fields' of cultural practices. This moves away from a preoccupation with interpreting the meaning, value, and power of cultural texts (1991). He devised logics for investigating the forces that surround and animate the movement of cultural objects. Straw undergirds scene thinking by hybridizing Bourdieu (1984), Miege (1986) and De Certeau (1990) – the set of principals of validation and change within cultural space derived from Bourdieu, the temporalities or lifecycle of cultural commodities in particular music cultures from Miege, and from De Certeau a microsociology of backlashes or failed and successful attempts at redirection within a given cultural terrain (495-496). Straw's early work dealt specifically with the cultural space occupied by musical scenes where "a range of musical practices coexist" (494). Later, he expanded the concept's reach to include a wider range of cultural scenes.

Over the course of a decade, the scene came to represent “particular clusters of social and cultural activity without specifying the nature of the boundaries which circumscribe them” (Straw 2004 412). This lack of precise boundaries is interpretable as multi-scalar and multi-temporal, as scene activity can move social energy “in multiple directions – onwards, to later iterations of itself; outwards, to more formal sorts of social or entrepreneurial activity; upwards, to the broader coalescing of cultural energies within which collective identities takes shape” (412). To be clear, Straw suggests the enclosure offered by the concept can fit any socio-cultural activity. The scene suggests the importance of grounded approaches to collective human activity, and “invites us to map the territory of the city in new ways, while, at the same time, designating certain kinds of activity whose relationship to territory is not easily asserted’ (Straw 412). Certain applications of the concept, notably Tironi’s (2011) contribution from human geography, foreground the spatial ordering of scenes, using concepts like cluster to situate scene activity in space quantified by geographical implements.

In his 2004 survey of scene literature, Straw notes, with some surprise, the popularity of the concept scene amongst studies dealing with the production and consumption of music. Hesmondhalgh suggests that this concept is regrettably overused, and notes that in 2004 the then president of the IASPM (International Association for the Study of Popular Music) declared that scene was one of “few concepts that popular music studies had made its own” (27). This popularity has invited clear critiques, especially surrounding the looseness of the term’s usage. As summarized by Hesmondhalgh, “[i]n many cases, the term seems to be used to invoke a notion of the musical (and music-associated) practices occurring within a particular geographical space”, but “[p]erhaps a perceived elasticity is a result of the very imprecision of the concept itself” (29).

More recently, the concept was expanded to order other socio-cultural formations, for example art scenes (Gielen 2011) and the social scenes and cinema going practices of the South Asian diaspora living in the UK (Puwar 2007). Following this movement, I pursue Straw’s invocation to apply this concept to a wider range of socio-cultural activity, drawing perhaps on the approachability of a term that is widely used in general parlance and suggestive of flexibility, “which designates both the effervescence

of our favourite bar and the sum total of all global phenomena surrounding a subgenre of Heavy Metal music" (Straw 2001 248). While my project describes a local music scene and thus has similarities to the Popular Music Studies approach to scenes, I'm most interested in the social, affective and material forces animating scenes.

**Queering the Scene**

Enter Bobby Benedicto, who recently extended the use of scene to capture the roiling modernity experienced by middle-to-upper class gay men in Manila in *Under Bright Lights* (2014). In this ethnographic account he applies the concept of scene to cradle an array of experiences that collectively constitute this gay life:

> What I am calling the bright lights scene is, thus, unlike the bounded culture imagined in classical ethnographic studies. It does not refer to an anthropological place that exists, somewhere, fixed, a destination waiting to be arrived at and represented through a list of abstracted traits, but to a tangle of potential connections, an assemblage that comes together when links are anxiously traced, felt, and made between spaces, forms, bodies, objects, dreams, trajectories, images, signs, styles, and other forceful and affecting elements (Benedicto 3-4).

Here is an iteration of the concept that sensitizes analysis to a wider range of forces and entities displacing and displaced in cultural space. Immersed in a queer context and attuned to the affective circuits within a scene, this text's insights will be mined heavily for this project. Benedicto's deployment of lyrical and descriptive writing brings to life affective linkages that cross the registers of online sex-portals, dance clubs, magazines, dialects and anecdotes brought home from global clubbing hotspots. In Benedicto's formulation, the generative matrix of the scene is, bluntly, the imbrication of gayness and global capital: "the production of a world grounded in a minoritized sexual identity appears animated by systems of privilege" (3). Through these systems of privilege, subjects co-construct identities around imaginaries that are generated by visions of gay modernity backed by global-capital in the west. This welcomes middle-class gay men into a marketable consumer fold for media goods, experiences and products. If we consider Straw's suggestion that scenes be understood by the ways activities within them produce "urban culture as a set of institutions and textures" (Straw 2004 412), we are pointed towards the vertical movement between localized activities and globalized

matrices.

Jodi Taylor suggests that queer scenes can be conceptualized as existing within "a trichotomous system that situates scenes as operating within and across local, translocal and virtual contexts" (Taylor 148), and specifically situates the queer within the translocal, the amorphous sites of exchanges "where local nodes of culture become enmeshed across geographical boundaries and within a larger system of cultural experiences and exchange" (148). As my project is specifically interested in queer action – and the affects this action produces – within Montreal's electronic music scene, analysis will draw on a conceptualization of the scene that invites tracing agency across "discontinuous elements that do not just *add up* but *stick* together to eke out the contours of a way of life" (Benedicto 8).

In order to account for queer world making in the Montreal scene, I draw from the utopian thinking of queer theorist José Muñoz. His formulation of queerness is always unfinished, a stance that maintains "we are not quite queer yet, that queerness, what we will really know as queerness, does not yet exist" (2009 22). This figuring of queerness sits well with the scene I describe, a set of trajectories motivated towards a social experience of electronic music that is at odds with the hetero-masculine, hetero-normative social behaviour in the wider electronic music scene in Montreal. This is a queer scene that can be read as searching for an as-of-yet-unknown configuration, and there is an a-temporality in its conception that bodes well with the drive "to activate the no-longer-conscious and to extend a glance toward that which is forward-dawning, anticipatory illuminations of the not-yet-conscious" (28). This presents a field of possibility for describing and analyzing queer movements within the scene, and sets up these social relations as occurring in an "ontologically humble state, under a conceptual grid in which we do not claim to always already know queerness in the world" (22)

**Cultural Life of the City**

This project is preceded by a significant number of works that deal with cultural production in Montreal (Stahl 2001; Straw 2005; Stolarick and Florida 2006; Madden 2016). Stahl describes a city of "two complementary narratives: one of economic decline and weakness marked indelibly by language tensions and sovereignty debates, and the

other, a narrative of resilience as expressed through the mythical character of its enduring cultural life" (2001 100). He suggests the former narrative as fuelling a bohemia shored up by the "city's notoriously cheap rents, a chronically depressed economy marked by high rates of un-and under-employment, the promise of low-cost but by no means less-refined leisure, the open-minded Euro-civility" (101).

David Madden (2016) and Straw (2004) extend this characterization of cultural-surplus-through-economic-depression, examining the variety of spaces available for street-level culture. They suggest economically accessible performance and residential spaces for "accommodating the city's ever-expanding population of musicians' (31). Charting social spaces of music listening and socialization, Madden describes the electroclash scene in early 2000s Montreal with special attention to the tension surrounding legal/illegal performance and dance venues in Montreal in the 1990s-2000s period (30-31). Straw (2004) describes the clever arrangement of space in hybrid bar-cultural spaces along St. Laurent "where upper-floor venues, in turn, [are] appended to a bar or club operating near street level and drawing a more demographically varied and commercially stable clientele" (414). Cultural-commercial arrangements balance creative licence and economic necessity, where actors invigorate existing spaces repeatedly and differently so that "the new places or rituals for socializing come to be intertwined with a history of cultural forms" (414).

The dynamics within these spaces, the character of the activity and affective order as experienced by participants further specifies the attention of this project. I will connect these localized experiential dynamics with the forces and forms that suggest the social arrangement of these spaces. Tim Lawrence's (2011) study of queer social dance in New York is a historical scene analysis that deals primarily with the behavior of bodies on dance floors, analyzing abstracted social and cultural forces that precipitated the shift from partner dancing to social dance. These new patterns of expressive behavior in 1970s New York Disco are described at a nexus of living space practices, law, audio technologies and the affiliation of participants to a diverse array of social movements (2011). The queerness of the parties slowly off-centers the tradition of (heterosexual) partnered dancing-as-courtship for social dance, and with the help of interview data suggests that on these floors the exchange of social energies became the primary aim.

Lawrence explores the sonic profile of DJed disco music and its liberating sensual possibilities for dancing bodies: “[d]isco also offered dancers the chance to experience the body as a polymorphous entity that could be re-engineered in terms that confounded conservative models of masculinity and femininity” (237).

**Affected Bodies**

The Techno music that dominates the scene I study literally moves me in ways that few other genres do. The sound emerged from a specific socio-historical context experienced by black artists who grew up in Detroit during the slow demise of the auto industry, from the 1960’s onwards. Richard Pope explains how the genre can be interpreted as a musico-affective mediation of the dystopic reality these artists encountered (Pope 2011 29). His analysis of Detroit Techno reads the pounding 4/4 beat and repetitive call of the siren as witness to the city’s disintegration, for, “in Detroit one must face, everyday, the reversibility of utopian capitalist fantasy and partial reality into dystopian capitalist reality” (26 2011). Pope suggests that techno does not differentiate or separate positive and negative affects, that techno is “observing and playing to the real of its environment, but also, and concurrently, by remediating and developing prior imaginings of the future” (29). This is detailed as a genre

> fixated on the Real of dystopian affect, Detroit techno thereby marks a kind of shadow culture for those who do not turn their radar away from the dystopia of the dehistoricized and desubstantialized present and the “future” which is its necessary result. Indeed, in Detroit there is a certain slippage between the Real as the impossible, structurally excluded from discourse and experience, and the Real as something which one “experiences” face-to-face on a daily basis; Detroit’s real continually (re)becomes Real (26).

Pope highlights that as techno was adopted in Europe, and specifically Germany, this music developed an affective stance that “by contrast, seems to slip between being the result of a felt sense of the premature demise of the modern project and of a sense of modernity’s triumphant realization with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the reuniting of Europe” (42). Pope notes that while European techno remains popular in Europe and elsewhere, Detroit techno has failed to make a mark within American culture (36). Montreal DJ’s play a range of techno music varieties. This project will return to Pope’s

analysis of the bifurcated affective stance of Detroit techno, both the emancipatory experience offered by the sounds and the survivalist drive that continually acknowledges the real negative affects of environments. I aim to trace similar articulations that link experience of the immediate social milieu (in this case the queer dance floor) and the popularity of a cultural form to abstract economic, social and cultural forces through felt states, or affects.

The analysis of Lawrence and Pope rely on affect theory, a diverse theoretical endeavour that undoes hermetic categories of felt intensities. Affect theory deals in the movement of noticeably charged states (from preconscious intuition to thought/feeling directed action) between bodies, human and non-human. Martha Figlerowicz, in a comprehensive overview of the field, suggests that an overlapping interest of affect theorists is preoccupation with the "movements or flashes of mental or somatic activity rather than causal narratives of their origins and end points" (2012 4). This description privileges movement, which harmonizes with the 'animating forces' written throughout literature on scenes and the forward looking, never to be arrested horizon of queerness described by Munoz. I prefer a strain of affect theory proposed by Kathleen Stewart in *Ordinary Affects* that, according to Figlerowiczs, "openly allow[s] the tension between conscious and unconscious affects to remain unresolved, pointing to philosophical problems this uncertain causality raises in our understanding of self-expression or empathy" (2012 7). Stewart uses ethnographic methods to follow moments of affective tension that ripple through social events she experiences. She produces an understanding of affect that crosses bodies and socio-cultural forms: "[o]rdinary affects highlight the question of the intimate impacts of forces in circulation" (2007 40). Stewart's writing inspires Benedicto's assertion that affects are apparent yet diffuse within the porous boundaries of the scene. They latch on to awareness "in spite of the elusiveness of its dimensions, the scene is nonetheless palpable as a thing; how it can be named and recognized even though its relationship to territory cannot" (5). These affects cannot be precisely pinpointed – they sit uncomfortably, forcing the "acknowledgment that there are things that cannot be straightforwardly represented" (20).

**(Trans) Cultural Forms**

Where this affective map-making alone might be confounding, I'd like to also rely upon the more traceable structure of socio-cultural forms. In this regard, Gaonkar and Povinelli suggest attention at "the edges of forms as they circulate" (2003 392) that overlap in movement and ensure that "environments are built to make one's life easier or harder to negotiate, one's body seem smoother or more jagged, they entail, demand, seduce, intoxicate, and materialize rather than simply mean" (395). Their use of form includes textual forms to forms of subjecthood and the nation state. This approach was adopted by Straw (2010) and Benedicto for interpreting the arrangement of scenes, and I will engage heavily with both meditations on the circulations of forms within scenes. For as Straw suggests, "[e]dges constitute the interfaces of cultural artefacts with human beings and other forms, the surfaces which organize a form's mobility" (23).

With a firm dedication to reconceptualising the richness of social worlds, I include the thought of radical anthropologist Eduardo Vivieros de Castro. His work *Cannibal Metaphysics* advocates for destabilizing the hegemony western thought has over all other ways of being and knowing. He formulates a plan for a truly self-reflexive anthropology that would hold indigenous cosmologies and metaphysics in equivalence with Western thought, with the goal of destabilizing the latter. The colossal challenge of this project is seconded by an argument of Gaonkar and Povinelli's text, who advocate for cultural transfiguration rather than translation. They provide examples of the social embeddedness of signs and the difficulty of translation between different social systems of differently embedded signs. They offer the example of a Maya village in Guatemala, where "a woman may be seen to physically harm her husband if, while he is working to clear a new pasture, she accidentally or intentionally tears a tortilla in her frying pan. How should the organization of gender and power be analyzed if one of the sites of its investment is the fragility of a tortilla?" (2003 394). With this in mind, I'd like to consider de Castro's explanation of the fundamental system within Amerindian cosmology, where he transfigures for western readers "a universe inhabited by diverse types of actants or subjective agents, human or otherwise-gods, animals, the dead, plants, meteorological phenomena, and often objects or artefacts as well-equipped with the same general ensemble of perceptive, appetitive, and cognitive dispositions: with the same kind of

soul" (2014 57). Using De Castro's thought I'd like to establish attunement to the interrelatedness of various kinds of actants in social space, and his welcoming definition of actant itself. For, as Skafish opines in the introduction to the text, "[d]efinitively identifying who all the beings are that give definition to oneself is extremely difficult" (Skafish 2014 25). I take this as an opportunity to continue along the line of thought developed by the feminist ethnographers. I think that the complexity and completeness of the Montreal techno scene is a site to think about the ontological implications of social words. While too abstract for the direct purpose of this project, this text is nonetheless enticing to consider when engaged in ethnography, when surrounded and submerged in the environments generated by the scene.

**Research Methods**

The scene that I investigate is realized at "street-level", a cultural formation that I interact with directly in Montreal. This ethnography includes 'intimate insider' interviews with friends, a form of participant observation known as sensory ethnography and writing as method. All of these are qualitative research methods, a set of research practices that "emphasize human interactions and processes" (Sawchuk 2011 3).

The interviews conducted for Chapter 2, and sensory ethnography in Chapter 3, involved framing the pre-existing relationships I have with the people within the scene. I'm using intimate insider research, a strain of feminist ethnographic research. Jodi Taylor describes how "feminist ethnographic debates have inspired a considerable amount of literature highlighting the usefulness and some of the dilemmas of establishing close and empathetic relationships between the researcher and the observed" (2011 4). This type of research is undertaken by many feminist ethnographers (Coffey, 1999; Edwards and Ribbens, 1998; Krieger, 1987). However, as Taylor notes, there is little ethnographic literature that describes beginning research in familiar territory, with informants who are *already* established friends or acquaintances; a research project interpreting known relationships *and* familiar environments. She theorizes this as the 'intimate insider' primarily in relation to researchers whose "pre-existing friendships (close, distant, casual or otherwise) evolve into informant relationships – friend-informants – as opposed to the majority of existing work that deals

with informant-friendships." (8). Feminist ethnographers have noted the general aversion amongst ethnographers to intimate research (Delyser 2001; England 1994; Edwards 2002), and acknowledge the potential pitfalls of being too close with the researched group, include: detail blindness, emotional/ethical complications, participation over observation and detail overload (Delyser 2001).

This approach attempts to develop a research environment where "the narrative of the researched and the researcher become entwined" (Taylor 6). England describes feminist ethnographers favouring reciprocal relationships with informants that connect with anti-hierarchical understandings of the social: "[t]he intersubjective nature of social life means that the researcher and the people being researched have shared meanings and we should seek methods that develop this advantage" (1994 243). This rejects traditional neo-positivist empiricism that position the researcher as "[the] omnipotent expert in control of both passive research subjects and the research process" (242). Taylor, in researching her own queer Brisbane community, decided, "to see myself, my social actions, interactions and performances as part of the phenomena under investigation and not as someone distinct from it" (Taylor 16). This equivalence situates the researcher as within the circulatory, the affective, the relational; a component of the moving composition that makes up the social territory under study.

This process of re-evaluating self-understanding in relation to the 'object' of study is pushed further in Delyser's research amongst tourists and coworkers/friends at her long-term place of employment: a state-protected California ghost town. She says, "I came to view myself – my body – not just as a research instrument but also as a site through which Bodie visitors make a version of the past meaningful to themselves in the present" (447). Delyser's attention to her physical body as also not her own is an act of de-subjectivization that observes various bodies and forms interacting as equals, and linked by an articulation of 'history' within the park. I invoke Delyser to account for the complexity of contingent interfaces in research; in this case the interaction of park workers, park visitors, heritage cultural object, forms of historical text and story.

In Chapter 3 this research engages heavily my emplaced, sensory encounter with alternative techno culture, and analysis will benefit from the application of principles from sensory ethnography, a modification of participant-observation that "entails our

multisensorial embodied engagements with others… and with their social, material, discursive and sensory environments" (Pink 2012 4). These techniques draw on the phenomenological tradition that interrogates sensory-perceptive arrangements while entailing a host of "sensory meanings and modalities people call on and the sets of discourses through which they mobilize embodied ways of knowing in social contexts" (8). The environments Pink describes are places, defined as the contextual emplacement of bodies she constructs most notably through the work of Casey (1996) and Massey (2005), describing how both acknowledge "the human and non-human elements of place and suggest how place as event is constantly changing through social and material relations and practices" (Pink 12). These immediate sensory environments are not only immediate, as the "[the] lived immediacy of the 'local' as constituted through the making of ethnographic places is inevitably interwoven, or entangled, with the global" (13). This approach to ethnography aligns with the discontinuous-but-connected elements of socio-cultural formation described in the scene literature above.

Laurel Richardson, in "Writing as a Method of Inquiry" explains how post structuralist qualitative research challenges "traditional qualitative writing practices, the sacrosanctity social science writing conventions" (Richardson 962). She suggests that contemporary qualitative researchers have the grounding to "understand ourselves reflexively as persons writing from specific positions at specific times… and it frees us from trying to write a single text in which everything is said at once to everyone" (962). A multiplicity of creative writing styles and methods have evolved, and as whole, this means that ethnographic writing has "blurred, enlarged and altered with researchers writing in different formats for a variety of audiences" (96).

I aim to bring the reader into the places I describe: amongst the excited movements of expressive bodies, the lights and the compression of heavy bass against your chest as you dance. This calls on Michael Taussig's description of the magic in representation, about "fieldwork notebooks with their more or less randomized observations, meta-observations, insights, afterthoughts, and images, as having the potential—at least the potential—to be considered as modernist art objects with magical properties like fetishes and talismans capable of acting on the world" (2015 75). Developing these little observations until they are crystalline, collecting light and

refracting its intensities in flashes of understanding that transmute into words the energy of what struck me in the field. Kernels of experience that take full advantage of the power of mythology embedded in language, “by writing little scenes or ethnographic sketches with each one serving as a comment on the one preceding, searching for a medium that can perhaps do justice to the unsayable no less than the unsaid” (171), taking the writing process with a self-seriousness towards process, as though we are “shamans in using our trick of the trade” (178). With these words, maddeningly reconsidered and rewritten, I attempt “poetry to out-manoeuvre the poetry inherent to all human understanding and activity” (178).

# CHAPTER 2

# VOICES FROM THE DARK

This chapter applies Straw's and Benedicto's formulation of scene to the world of Montreal's alternative electronic music landscape. Using the ethnographic method of depth interviewing and more casual conversations with friends, I analyze the scene through the opinions of four cultural producers in the Montreal scene. Both these modalities emerge from the explorations of intimate insider research explored in Chapter 1. Depth interviews were 1-2 hours of intensive conversation, while informal conversations were scattered across in-person and online encounters over the period of a year. The chapter also investigates cultural forms that intersect within the scene and queer affects that circulate between bodies of all types, or, as Stewart describes it, "human bodies, discursive bodies, bodies of thought, bodies of water" (128), working towards a rich imprint of this social world. Over the course of this chapter I'll refer to the scene in various terms: as an alternative techno scene, D.I.Y, a queer techno scene, electronic music scene, dance music scene, and occasionally the word 'underground' surfaces. Participants don't all recognize the scene in the same terms or with the same cultural or geographic boundaries; this makes definitive labels difficult.

## The Participants

When I told friends about this project people quickly volunteered or recommended others to participate, and I soon had more possibilities than time available for this project. Three of the four participants are DJs/event producers. Leticia began DJing in 2015 after experimenting with various artistic outlets and quickly met and began working with the Montreal queer techno crew initiated by Frankieteardrop. Danji is a long time Montreal musician and more recently a DJ. He's deeply interested by the philosophical and spiritual elements of rave culture. Catherine moved to Montreal for the music scene and is a vocal advocate for safer dance floors and the representation of queer/femme DJ's and is also in a crew with Leticia and Frankieteardrop. Jessie was a

prominent 1990's rave dancer who was initiated into the underground as a teenager, when he would travel the northeast of the continent to attend raves. All are at least tenuously connected through personal networks, and three regularly produce events and DJ together, two are romantic partners.

These people are confident speakers and our strong conversational rapport made for lively discussions about their cultural production and social lives. Asking them to speak to their individual experience of the scene, I hoped to manifest multiple subject perspectives on something shared. Most of the interviewees are friends, and while getting to know them, before this project came together, I noted how each of them spoke passionately and precisely about the scene in which they moved. I was made aware of my own unstable position through their interpretations; I noticed changes in my understanding and orientation towards the scene as I absorbed their words. This led me to question the ways the discursive space of the scene, real social space and imaginary of the scene is negotiated. These opinions made apparent phenomena and relationships that I would not have noticed on my own. As Taylor reminds us, "as a cultural participant, one can never assume totality in their position as either an insider or as an outsider (Taylor 2013 7). This process sensitized me to the contingency of individual experiences of the scene, and I noticed that when participants shared opinions, they never felt exclusive: as they spoke I recognized space around their words, place for other characterizations of the scene. I left these conversations feeling like they had articulated one of many possible versions of a shared experience. I began to imagine the perspectives of the participants disembodied and floating in a matrix of social space, nearby one another but their paths separated. Prepared for and aware of each other's presence, but nonetheless a distinct bundle of connections and associations waiting to activate through conversation.

**Recognizing Scenes**

Recognizing a social event as a moment of scene-ness depends on the particular sensitivities of the observer. The development of these capacities accrues what Sarah Thornton terms 'subcultural capital': a way of knowing grounded in interpretive skills and the social credibility – displayed as hipness – acquired through repeated engagement

with a subcultural formation (1996). Someone walking into an afterhours tucked away in a walk-up apartment in Montreal's Gay Village at 6 AM might momentarily think they are walking into a 'drug house' as I did three years ago, after being invited by a stranger following an event for techno music festival MUTEK and offered drugs on the way to the party. In this moment, I was both aware of an electronic music scene where such parties would carry on well into the morning but startled by the intensities of this iteration in a city I was just beginning to discover, and perhaps beholden to images from the mainstream imaginary of 'dangerous drug houses'. The August morning sunlight, the stare from the knot of people standing outside the door, the almost-aggressive sexual pursuit of my host all prepared me for an overwhelming and perhaps dangerous encounter. But as I passed a threshold between worlds and entered a room lined with velvet curtains, noticed the light cast there by the disco ball, felt the industrial fan's breeze and watched the milling of tired but contented bodies, I relaxed. I danced. Of course, should the juncture of my value systems and socio-cultural experience be even the slightest bit different, the encounter with the aesthetics of the space may not have overtaken the perception of the drug house – the music and dancing passed over as secondary effects. The behaviours and knowledge garnered through previous experience, and identification with the values and forms of alternative culture that this scene privileges suggest what will and won't be appreciated.

When we spoke for this project, Danji was reverential about his first, accidental encounters with the electronic music events in Montreal. He described his pre-techno days, playing in bands, and a night when he stumbled into a techno party and was shocked by "how far away, and in a different world it felt like I ended up. These things were going on down the block from where I'd been throwing the same shows with the same people for years". This feeling of landing in another world speaks to the richness of scene experience. The terrain of the outside, the space of 'just down the block', becomes ineffable inside the bloom of a world he little knew existed. An iteration of the scene, in the form of an event, fills and textures space for witnesses. In this submersion, Danji encountered overlapping components of the scene: new people, a sensory arrangement and specific material conditions, the quality and quantity of energies in movement, and their overlap and structuration as social and cultural forms, that, all

together, become a world. Or, as Gaonkar and Povinelli put it “social life is understood to be composed of interlocking, multifunctional diagrams that act as demanding environments on subjects, texts, and practices” (395). The backdrop of the event space is enlivened by more than the materiality of lights, mixers, PA systems, scenography and décor via the socio-cultural standards of the scene. In Danji’s case, the cohesiveness and unfamiliarity in an unexpected scene encounter is evidence of bounty: “all of a sudden Montreal felt a lot bigger”. Multiple unknown scenes existing nearby one another present proof of Montreal’s size, not geographically, but culturally and socially, diversity and health is indicated by worlds whose processes can move independently of one another. Danji, now a scene insider, seems to acknowledge how the cultural capital he’d accumulated in one scene did not attune him to the existence or patterns of another scene. In certain respects, many movements and circulations remain internal to a world.

**Boundaries of the Scene**

The difference between inside and out, are, for Benedicto, necessary to the scene’s recognisability: “[t]he continuity of the scene, however, was contingent on the ability of different sites to similarly realize displacement and to effectively harmonize the images recalled by signs and the material landscape” (52). Danji’s description of the scene as amounting to a different world seems to center on the effect of feeling transported, which Benedicto terms displacement. This effect moves with the scene and destabilizes the suture of being in an environment, managing a disruption of the body’s emplacement, what Pink describes as, “the relationships between bodies, minds and the materiality and sensoriality of the environment” (2012 4). Pink goes on to foreground Ingold’s claim that the environment is “a source of information, not merely raw data” (Ingold in Pink 6). Furthering this conceptualization of emplacement, Pink invokes Gibson, who “makes ‘mind’ immanent in the network of sensory pathways that are set up by virtue of the perceiver's immersion in his or her environment” (Gibson in Pink 6). This qualification centers environmental effects registered by subjects, supporting claims that the scene can offer experiential and social fulfillment. Straw’s own thinking on scenes seems to offer an emplaced approach for subjects coming to know the scene: it is the environment and relationships participants navigate *into* that garner membership.

He explains within a “spatial relationship of outside to inside; the neophyte advances “horizontally”, moving from the margins of a scene towards its center” (2013 413). When accruing the subcultural capital necessary to navigate the displacement offered by the scene environment, media objects are consumed as tokens of scene culture that help attune subjects to the codes imbedded in the scene environment. Straw notes that “a variety of urban media (from alternative weekly newspapers to Internet-based friendship circles) now act as way-finding aids in this process” (413).

*Under Bright Lights* looks carefully at subjects as they traverse the city and pass within and without the bright lights scene of affluent gayness in Manila. Benedicto articulates the effects of an existence mediated by the automobiles gay subjects use to cross flyovers that soar briefly above the third world terrain, nights recessed in globally aspiring condo enclaves and the clubs which emerge seemingly overnight to meet demands for the representational effects of gay globality. Benedicto summarizes Neferti Tadiar’s (2009) plotting of how modernity’s representational effects, such as architectures, social Movements, identities, ultimately engender real effects – exclusionary protocols, structural inequity. Manila offers a striking divide between bright lights modernity and the patchwork disorder of the city at large. In this context, the experiential effects of crossing between inside and outside of the scene are particularly noticeable. Inside, the materiality of the scene and attendant socio-cultural forms engender an experience of enchantment: “in the space of the bright lights scene, subjects are submerged in the fantasy-desires that animate the third-world city” (17). These intoxicating effects can be attributed to flows that intersect within the scene. Gaonkar and Povinelli, summarizing Globalization Studies luminary Arjun Appadurai, recognize that the imaginary space of little worlds like scenes are the result of a confluence of flows: “the circulation of people, ideas, media, technology, and finance provides the generative matrix for creating myriad and disjunctive ‘imaginary worlds’ when modernity goes global” (Appadurai 1996 in Gaonkar and Povinelli 390). Given the specificity of the scene Benedicto describes, and the economic and social privilege required to access these flows, participation in the scene necessarily involves exclusion: “the spaces that rise like havens where the *we* of the bright lights scene takes form and the outside that is refused access” (18).

In November 2017, alongside Danji and fellow interviewee Leticia, I went to a rave put on by a collective called Subliminal Frequencies in the east of the city. They emphasized what they termed “crewing up” before the party, so we all gathered at the house Danji shares with two other DJ’s, got dressed and applied makeup together. The collective is run by a group of Quebecois ravers, parties I was familiar with from a distance – socially and geographically. It took place in Montreal-East, in an industrial park in Anjou. Anecdotes I’d heard of this scene revolved around the extravagant décor and participants’ dedication to costuming, a focus Leticia contrasted with the minimal aesthetic that dominates the Mile-End scene. The event space, a hybrid reception and dance hall, was extravagantly decorated. One of the rooms was filled with people dancing to banging, harsh post-dubstep noise. In the other room a MC’s voice would occasionally interrupt the music to energize the crowd. I was impressed by the presence of a serious looking substance testing station that handed out branded care packages of condoms, gum and instructions for dealing with substance poisoning. Unlike most parties I attend it was all-ages, many of the attendees were very young, and I tried not to stare at a tween buying a small package, quietly thankful for the testing station. Jugs filled with fruit infused water and energizing snacks for sale also contributed to sense of community care. Danji was DJing at 2am, and after enjoying most of his set taking in the somewhat jarring experiential world of this scene, the SPVM (Montreal Police) arrived. After some failed negotiations, everyone was forced to leave the venue. Outside a long line of police cars waited. Ravers stood about in freezing temperatures with claws of hot breath suspended above them, figuring out what to do since raving-till-dawn was cut short. Our crew organized which of us would drive and we debated whether to be worried about having more people than seats in our vehicle – we decided two people should walk ahead and meet us past the line of police cars – and left without issue.

The following afternoon Danji thanked us for ‘being part of a great crew’ in a Facebook group chat and posted two photos of revelers staring down police during a rave crackdown in Montreal, circa 1993. He wrote that the photographer of these photos was the father of one of people in the Subliminal Frequencies crew. The Facebook event page was listed as BUSTED, and on the wall other attendees had posted dramatic photos/videos of 1990’s rave encounters with police, connecting the images to the rave

experience of the night before. The relatively mundane rave shutdown was refracted and interpreted through dramatic images of resistance to repression that are embedded in the scene imaginary. Forms of control and resistance are recognized and analyzed because waves of crackdowns on underground parties by the SPVM have occurred many times before. It's almost expected. As I watched police clear people from the venue, I considered how such incursions breathe new life into the energy structure of the scene.

On the subject of imaginaries shared within the scene, Benedicto explains how one of his interviewees claimed that going to BED, among the first gay clubs in Manila, was like "meeting the image" (57) after years of watching Queer as Folk. This Manila club interior realizes the gay life imagined through watching a television show before it could be experienced. He later reflects on trips to island beaches outside of the Manila city limits where his friends recreated erotic and social possibilities of urbanity, explaining, "we could not escape the city, or the concept of the city" (42). The sensory experience of the beach is transformed by the presence of scene actors: "we fled there—to the middle of nowhere—only to urbanize it, to turn its crevices into a back alley, to hear the drum of dance music in the sound of waves breaking against rocks" (42).

**Conflict with the Mainstream**

Like the Bright Lights scene yearning for elsewheres, the Montreal scene yearns for a hermetic seal. The repression of 1990's raves made the scene cautious, perhaps even paranoid, about outsiders. Today, because of the panic surrounding these large gatherings, the noise pollution and substance use, police are quick to appear at parties deemed too big, and the outcome of such interactions is never certain. These police apply the law inconsistently, and there are myriad infractions individual officers can choose to cite for in spaces not meant for large gatherings. Given the possibilities of major fines party promoters and DJ's avoid drawing undue attention to events. In some cases, this tendency develops into paranoia that imagines the scene as always under observation. For example, at an event in Fall 2016, a local music producer emerged from a record label and venue, hurried over to a group of us by the curb and asked

whether we'd seen police patrolling. Suspicious Facebook profiles had sent performers friend requests earlier that day, what he suspected was an attempt by the SPVM to gather information about the event.

Danji explains how even at the earliest stages of event planning some deception is necessary. He referenced preliminary interactions with potential landlords, "you have to have those conversations where you feel like this sketchy party promoter…so you're telling these weird half true stories". Danji positions himself as a record label representative hoping to find a short-term jam space for musicians. He later acknowledges that this charade is inhabited because the intended use of a rented room is contested. Danji presumes that street level organization of electronic music are less acceptable then organized music production. He suggests self-patrolling, masking the scene's presence by renting in liminal zones on short-term agreements, so brief that any complaints are unlikely to make their way to events as uniformed police. And then, "When it's starting to get heaty – then you leave!". For example, a basement venue bordered by a busy thoroughfare and a bus depot in the largely industrial district of Chabanel received little attention until one night a partygoer climbed onto the roof of a nearby building – which turned out to be a church – during an all-night mass and was seen by a parishioner. The police were called, apologies were made and somehow the party was not shut down. I approached the venue just as the police arrived and one of the organizers noticed me and asked me to keep walking. It looked like the venue door was barred from the inside. The crew left that location soon after the event.

When I've done the tiring work of searching for a venue, often in the east of the city, the process of noting buffers between the party and the outside, like orientation of the entrances, the distance to residential buildings and architectural hideaways for smokers are key considerations. In 2016 a collaborator and I rented out a church basement for an event and were careful to describe the event (live electronic acts and DJ sets) to the management as a night of 'conceptual electronic music'. This was true; the event was not primarily a dance party. Nonetheless, on the event night the building's stained glass rattled uncomfortably and neighbours sat out on their lawns watching groups of smokers (who we begged to smoke quickly) socialize on the church steps as waves of bass barrelled down otherwise quiet streets. It was Sunday and the event

ended just after midnight. We packed up quickly and left after a minor dispute with the building manager, who was upset that the last DJ didn't finish his set until 12:03am – three minutes past our agreed end time. At 12:01 he threatened to cut the power.

The perceived social destabilization of the electronic music scene is etched into participants, particularly event promoters, who are sensitive to the implications of their sonic footprint in the city, an awareness that comes from the legislative and policing practices that discourage unlicensed, noisy parties. As Danji explains, when there's no liquor license and the building owner is unaware of proceedings inside, there's "lots of responsibility and fear involved" (11). Dance music culture's lawfulness is prismatic and unevenly patrolled. Socially and legally sanctioned events, for example the yearly EDM festival Igloofest, which happens over two weeks along the waterfront of the Old Port, can be heard 3km away in the Plateau every night for 2 weeks. The most popular DJ's of the underground scene are invited to play events, while their regular DJ gigs are always under threat of being shut down. Aversion to traces of the scene is widespread. Describing my thesis project to one of my cousins, a suburban firefighter whose life is outside the urban centers where social groups may encounter the scene, he interrupted and said disdainfully, "techno music parties are all pill poppers, right?". When the edges or representations of cultural forms celebrated within the scene travel into wider social arenas they become trapped – lodged within inhospitable value frameworks.

Several years ago while visiting Belgrade a Romanian friend explained the uneasy agreement between gay nightlife and the city at large. As a metropolis and the first city of the Balkans, there were several queer dance options, but they weren't particularly accepted or safe for participants: violence was always a possibility. The nature of one venue in particular – a multi-level dance club – was described as particularly contentious, because, from outside the club, passerby's could see the outlines of men dancing together on platforms near fogged windows. He told me that following a night out with local friends they were chased for blocks by a group of skinheads. He didn't take the threat posed by the pursuers seriously but his companions, noticing this, told him to run for his life.

The affective charge generated by the intersection of forms within the scene is intoxicating and supportive for participants, but encounters the wider landscape

awkwardly and dangerously. The jarring disjuncture between scenes and the city environment is more striking when the scene activities are socially marginalized. The force of dominant forms that reign beyond the limits of scene experience sobers the intoxication offered by scene submersion. Benedicto writes about an encounter with a boy moving through stopped traffic while during the return drive from the gay beaches beyond Manila: “midway, he turned to look at us. There was sudden recognition in his eyes. He smiled, a nasty smile, and yelled, “*Bakla!* [Fags!]” (43). The image of these boys dancing in the window, and the boys of Benedicto’s car window, are the recognizable edges of worldings that gather subjects. The difference of these edges marks them as resistant and makes them visible. The scenes move these subjects tangibly against the backdrop of the surrounding environment and dominant ways of being. Their participation in the scene is noticeable and noted from the outside, but the outside is barely sensible when you’re inside. This is an example of what cultural theorists Gaonkar and Povinelli describe as the “power-laden, interlocking levels of and contestations between cultures of circulation; the transfigurations they demand on the palpability, intelligibility, and recognizability of texts, events, and practices; and the play of supplementarity that enframes and ruptures the enterprise of public recognition, whatever its object” (395).

**Emancipatory Potential and Challenges**

Certain scene environments establish conditions for social relations that are different than what exists in the wider social landscape. They can offer the conditions that precipitate social validation, emancipation and the creation of new social forms. Describing the evolution of social dance amongst subjects connected to a host of 1960’s countercultural movements that emerged from the Disco scene of 1970’s New York City, Tim Lawrence writes about these diverse crowds:

> the reductionist focus on disco’s male gay constituency underestimates and even undermines the political thrust of early seventies dance culture, which attempted to create a democratic, cross-cultural community that was open- ended in its formation. Dance crowds were aware of their hybrid character as well as their proximity to the rainbow coalition of the countercultural movements of the late 1960s, and having witnessed the repressive state reaction against Black Panther activists, Stonewall Inn

> drag queens, and Kent State University and Jackson State University anti-war demonstrators, they took to exploring the social and cultural possibilities of the countercultural movement in the relatively safe space of dance venues. In these settings, dancers engaged in a cultural practice that did not affirm their maleness or their femaleness, or their queer or straight predilections, or their black, Latin, Asian or white identifications, but instead positioned them as agents who could participate in a destabilizing or queer ritual that recast the experience of the body through a series of affective vectors (2011 233).

Lawrence's analysis of the conditions that made novel social behavior possible marks the venue space as a container for subjects hypothesizing, with the movement of their bodies, about social arrangements nascent in these exchanges of affective intensity. This generative state of social indeterminacy was accessible through mutual pleasure, access made possible by equalizing the social space where individual experience of difference could inform and be superseded by collective experience.

In my research, it was clear that the contemporary queer scene is sensitive to possibilities of queer social dance experience, and hyper-attuned to the behaviors that make them impossible. Issues perceived by certain participants within the scene are pointed out repeatedly and without hesitancy. The use of DIY aesthetics is particularly egregious when parties fail to fulfill the social aims associated with the form. In our interview Catherine states, "most people are taking something that exists, regurgitating it and then calling it super D.I.Y. and underground but it's way more dangerous and way more expensive". Hosting parties described as DIY in alternative venues draws attention to the more than material social conditions that influence social experience. The form of DIY nightlife often intersect with other supporting forms like PWYC (Pay What You Can) or NOTAFLOF (No One Turned Away For Lack of Funds) entrance policies and zero tolerance for oppressive behavior. These forms have cascading effects for the social experience of participants and intersect/indicate with other alternative social forms. Catherine's recognition of the danger in ventriloquizing counter-cultural forms rests on an acknowledgment that this isn't always the case, and that DIY/alternative aesthetics can shroud negative social conditions. As Catherine states, many events are using the underground form without any attachment to its historical lineage: "the history of techno, the history of these kinds of events used to be very politically charged it used to be very

POC queer". For her, DIY ethics revolve around the approach and sensibilities of the hosts, and explains that her favorite parties are "thrown by people who are very mindful and have morals so they're really concerned about the general vibe – they want everyone to have this great communal experience. It's not about [the party producer] being cool shit". She opines that whoever is hosting and DJing attracts a certain crowd, and that if the former is straight white men, the latter will tend towards uninspiring and potentially dangerous social experiences, and surmises about these events: "If a girl got assaulted at their party they'll be like 'oh that sucks'. There's no acknowledgement whatsoever, if people start posting on the event page they delete the event page. It's all guys throwing these parties. If that shit happened in a queer party you would hear about it for months". The queer scene strives for the development of social tools that create environments where people are safe to explore their pleasure knowing that aggressive or oppressive behaviours will not occur unnoticed. Danji describes the ethos of rave in similar terms, but that highlights how the oft-encountered 'individualist approach' to party promotion reduces social-mindedness and limits the emancipation possible through parties. He explains that promoters "who have a really good spark of understanding rave spirit get lost in their own trip about what they're doing, and pay less attention to what everyone is doing at these parties".

Lawrence describes how dance parties were nebulous sites of social uncertainty. The formic hesitancy, which allowed participants to commune through dance across cultural difference to create new social forms, was key: "seventies dance culture, which attempted to create a democratic, cross-cultural community that was open-ended in its formation" (233). The open-endedness means that a destabilizing musico-social experience is not guaranteed: the potential for socially suggestive dance experience is not consistent. In Lawrence's example the relative safety of the dance floor, the diversity of participants and the sonic, material and technological affordances make possible unexpected social arrangements; participants strive for this without a steady formula or end-goal. Interviewee Jesse described how in 1990s rave culture similar social behaviors were incubated. He recounts with some nostalgia how it was important to be "cautious of people's space, conscious of people's vibes and energy. It was very important to be accepting" (5). This attitude is packaged in the rave meme and 'secret

handshake' PLUR (Peace, Love, Unity, Respect). Jesse is further from the contemporary scene but still attends parties, and notes that Leticia's and Catherine's crew, a group of queer female identified techno DJ's, is different: "why I appreciate those parties is because it feels special. It feels like there's something sacred there". Likewise Catherine spoke confidently about the possibility of achieving social evolution through parties, "a lot of people could throw really interesting parties, really progressive parties if they actually just put a bit of thought and work into it". She goes on to explain how she thinks that, "the perfect template for things to be more inclusive and more healthy is to have like groups of people of diverse backgrounds throwing events". Careful attention to the behaviors that are undesirable establishes boundaries within the scene and informs decision-making that prefigures the chance for social and affective phosphorescence. The politics and ethics that undergird social experience, ensuring that gender's fluidity can be pursued without self-consciousness and all bodies will feel confidently emplaced, are an example of what Gaonkar and Povinelli term a "multifaceted signal phenomenon – signaling the interior content of aesthetic form and message and the exterior political and social commitment to the circulation of this form and message as well as entailing the cultural logic of the circulatory matrix itself" (393).

Despite the belief in possibilities offered by the scene, there were significant dissatisfactions expressed in the interviews, or yelled at events and received via SMS message, complaints that ranged from mundane to serious. Leticia describes the jealousies that can arise from a scene "in a small city where opportunities are pretty limited". This was similar to comments scattered throughout two years of interactions, friends who mentioned needing a break 'because of the drama', the challenges of socializing in loud, dark venues, and bemoaning the limits of 'the socialization of the night'. Most critically Leticia and Catherine underlined the poor ethics and predatory social behaviour that can be hidden by the dark. These comments open onto larger critiques of gender and race relations in electronic music, and connect concretely with efforts by the queer scene to move laterally and distinguish itself, building alternative forms of electronic music dance parties. These can be read as attempts to renegotiate the lived experience of the scene by adding or modifying social forms. This includes aforementioned experiments with door policies, queer/female security staff, and active

listeners on dance floors for mediating conflict. These social appendages re-hinge points of overlap between forms and behaviours and produce arrangements that make possible novel collective experiential states within the scene.

These forms are deployed at a host of recurring Montreal dance parties: LIP, Cousins, Moonshine and LAGOM, in groups like PLURI (an afterhours safety initiative), and Intersessions (a workshop series for femme DJs). These practices draw from and connect the Montreal scene to other alternative cultural formations in other cities with queer underground electronic music scenes. There are active coalitional movements that link prominent alternative dance music initiatives like Brooklyn-based Discwoman – which Leticia credits with unifying queer femme DJ's in Montreal and seeding their success – and other hybrid cultural forms of the Brooklyn scene like RAGGA NYC and BYUSFORUS that connect people of colour, queers, and other minorities with online super-community, while establishing supportive and reinforcing affects and imaginative spaces within wider demanding environments.

These links to the Montreal scene became visible to me over the past two years through involvement in the affective networks I describe, connections that emerged most viscerally through Instagram follower suggestions, or offhand mentions at parties. These initiatives were revealed gradually once I began paying attention and adopting the values of the Montreal queer scene. This is a set of spaces and connections where social relations de-solidify, re-arrange and act as repellent to *that which is not welcome*. These are also way-markers within the Montreal scene, points of reference in a mini-cosmology of importance.

In some instances, the scene appears as generative space for amorphous social/cultural change, a test ground for those living otherness, captivated by dreams of that which isn't here and refusing the status quo. As Catherine suggests, producers are actively experimenting with untested arrangements for social pleasure that also aim for collective transformation. Taking What We Need supports low-income transwomen through dance parties, LIP regularly has fundraiser benefits, and the organizer Frankie Teardrop also puts on a minority focused performance festival, Slut Island. A popular house/disco collective recently began throwing families-welcome dance parties in an underutilized Mile-End church basement where a net stuffed full of balloons dropped

from the ceiling at midnight, signalling with excitement the end of that social/cultural moment.

Forms that are open and reactive to community needs strike close, in Muñozian terms, to always-abstracted utopian socialisms of theory. Muñoz explains his interest in the writing of C.L.R James, for whom socialist reality actually exists, albeit quietly, in pockets of equitable collective living. James exemplifies this most clearly with an anecdote about industrialized factory workers who organized their labour patterns over a 10-year period so that a physically disabled co-worker was relieved of mandatory duties that he was physically unable to complete (Muñoz 55). Similarly, Stewart recounts her stay in a 'utopian hotel' in Atlanta where her unexpected visit is characterized by a welcoming hominess: calm employees, abundant nourishment, warm social settings, and care materials extended to her without extra cost. The hotel was staffed and owned by Black Americans, and "it's like a scene of unexpected hope. A way of doing things differently. A nerve relaxed. A sense of learning" (Stewart 83). This invocation of otherness, of potential hidden in plain sight by the patterns and movement of contemporary life speak to Gaonkar and Povinelli's search for "the generative matrices that demand that things— including 'meaning' as a captivating orientation and phantasmatic object— appear in a decisive form in order for them to be recognized as value-bearing" (Gaonkar and Povinelli 395).

In interviews, anecdotes of desirable social interaction were discussed with reverence: explaining the "abstract zines" – a collection of poetry, designs and short stories – produced for dance events and their happenstance eruption into the awareness of people there for the party, Danji imagines situations where partygoers reading the zine connect with "someone else having a similar moment across that room and maybe that sparks some kind of nucleus of conversation or just mental presence moving forward". Jessie reminisces about forms of awareness and care that could characterize interactions with older ravers: "a lot of these people took me under their wing and took care of me made sure I was always OK, or hydrated. We called them mothers or fathers of the scene. I would say that that was mostly in the gay community though". Catherine juxtaposed the response to allegations of harassment at queer parties with mainstream techno parties, "I would say would be taken seriously and like

something would happen. It wouldn't be brushed or minimized and it definitely wouldn't be like implied that that never happens". These are kernels of socially emplaced recognition and action, spatial/temporal intervention in the flow of things, blocking certain status quo social behaviours and the forms and power structures they serve, while encouraging others.

Alignment of the "affective subject is a collection of trajectories and circuits" (Stewart 59). The subjects I've encountered in the scene are sensitive to forms that trace and retrace circuits through them. The scene is filled with trajectories that move through subjects. These people are rearranging themselves and the scene, orienting towards other spaces, ideals and tastes someplace nearby. Reflecting on contemporary existence, Stewart remarks how "[i]t's as if the solid ground has given way, leaving us hanging like tender cocoons suspended in a dream world. It's as if conditions and possibilities of a life have themselves begun to float" (61). I suggest that this is an opportunity for queerness to propagate new ways of being. I find support in Walter Benjamin, as written by Howard Caygill, who approaches modernity with uncharacteristic hopefulness, observing, "technical and social disruption of tradition bears with it the seeds of new forms of organization, many of which may not be immediately or ever realized" (Cagyill 1997 152). Despite Benjamin's recurrent refrain and plotting of modern experience's aesthetic and social decay, he recognized the possibility of new growth. In the words of Munoz "the not-quite-conscious is a realm of possibility that must be called on, and insisted on, if we are ever to look past the pragmatic sphere of the here and now, of the hollow nature of the present" (21). Experiencing the increasingly arbitrary and discontinuous procession of ideas that captivate social worlds in the present is largely unavoidable. Nonetheless circuits that are formed from intersections of cultural forms, subjects and ideological suppositions of there here and now is an avenue towards illuminating the not-yet-conscious. Mining the mainstream and quotidian realm of experience can also be instrumental for experimenting with lived otherness; embodying and enacting oppositional or iconoclastic stances does seed the affective possibility of new socio-cultural expressions taking hold.

Practically, experiments in the scene aren't always well received. I've heard complaints about the armband wearing active listeners, anti-masculine/butch rhetoric,

and repetitive venue choices that bring the party back under the patronage of traditional regulatory structures. Catherine described how: “I won’t enjoy the venue [for queer events] because usually they thrive for being safe as rule number one so sometimes they’ll end up working in venues that I just don’t care about”. A licenced bar imposes state regulations in which drinking establishments must watch the space. However, surveillance invites visibility, bringing bars closer to mainstream relational and social logics. This makes affinity-based otherness less palpable or possible for some participants, and structural violence, or it’s memory, more present. Or perhaps it’s even simpler: what’s known invites known behaviour. The potential for otherness in social relations requires producers who are mindful of occurrence and prepare environments for otherness.

When everything is going well, there’s an ontological shift that can occur on dance floors that moves in a direction that is difficult to qualify. To this effect, Lawrence says dance floors “opened up participants to the experience of the body as an entity that was not bounded and distinctive, but rather permeable and connected” (239). Similarly, Danji explained the experience of achieving intense dance states, where “bodies are rolling and consciousnesses are dispersing”, and he acknowledges these phenomena as “some facet of how bodies and music and space interact”. Danji’s more esoteric approach to dance thinking was apparent, a formulation that presents rave spirit and collective dance as an entry point onto practical socialism and consciousness expansion. His analysis is akin to the techno-shamanism explored by authors like St. John (2013). The way music affects individual subjects and groups is by many accounts a common preoccupation and one that resists simple explanation. I encountered a similar sentiment watching Andrei Tarkovsky’s *Stalker*, where the titular character, upset with the persistent dis-belief of his charges – a positivist scientist and postmodern writer, during an expedition into the unexplainable Zone, beseeches,

> take music for instance…less than anything else it is connected with reality. Or if connected at all, it’s done mechanically, not by way of ideas, just by sheer sound, devoid of any associations. And yet music, as if by some miracle gets through to our heart. What is it that resonates in us in response to noise brought to harmony, making it the source of greatest delight, which stuns us and bring us together (Tarkovsky 1979).

The character Stalker suggests that certain types of experience should be believed *prima facie*, and I try to keep this mode of interaction with sound in mind when I'm dancing at events. Music and dance alter consciousness and promote social unification; they are the through line underpinning all energetic processes within the scene.

**A Solid World in the Scene**

For certain subjects, alignment with the world of the scene is stronger than other social and cultural connections. Stewart describes how "anyone can find herself caught up in a little world. Sooner or later, everyone does. Something comes into view and you find yourself participating in the apparatus that made it" (109). Jessie recounted the process by which his adult life arranged slowly around the scene: "the rave scene definitely made it all happen for me, culturally, and I live in within my culture. So I don't go to work at a bank, I'm working on a design agency right now and that's through friends of friends in graphics". Since the 90's Jessie built on the networks and connections of rave. He explains that he hasn't had a resumé in 20 years, and that he wouldn't know where to start with one. People within the scene slowly found ways to rely on one another, trust that migrated across ventures and disciplines as they aged. Working in a kitchen was suitable while he was younger as he could sleep in, stay out late and the social structure of the restaurant kitchen crew was similar to that of his rave crew. Now Jesse conceptualizes restaurant menus and his early work doing graphics for parties developed into graphic and clothing design ventures. He thinks he proved his reliability and figured out ways to make a living outside of the mainstream's bureaucratic forms like resumes and interviews, which decide and patrol legitimacy, trust and experience outside of tight-knit groups. This lifeway can be read as a type of pragmatic socialism, abundance and sustenance slowly built up around people within the scene, bonds affixed by with affective and aesthetic similitude. His incomprehension of the resumé is particularly interesting considering how his descriptions of his adult productive experiences remain legible to outsiders like myself, but were accrued through values, connections and relationships established within the scene that don't, for him, translate into a static, reproducible affidavit of his productive worth. The possibility this occurrence suggests that possibility of scenes interfacing successfully with larger capitalist

structures, while retaining agency, community and independence, and speaks to the integrity and solidity of the scene as concept and way of life.

Leticia describes a similar experience of a sustenant scene that she's just beginning to experience. "Crewing up" made it possible to develop her DJ practice with people who were keen to give her support and the chance to improve: "I gained my experience and gained my name because I was trusted to be in those [queer] spaces and to play". She began DJing around the time that another DJ, Frankieteardrop, started organizing parties with other female-identified DJ's who were getting into techno. The parties blew up, and Leticia remarks how this crew is "a group of people who are moving things, in a certain way, together". Leticia since worked for a music mastering software company based in Montreal, and is now the music director of a Montreal based non-profit cultural hub. Leticia's friends and sites of social pleasure are also business partners and work sites, respectively, and her bosses trust her musical taste, scene understanding and social acumen to improve their brand, curate events and make global connections within electronic music.

The terrain outside of the crews of people moving together is less supportive. While crews put on competing (and occasionally collaborative) events, the social distance between these tight-knit groups and productive groups is never bridged. Given sonic and visual impediments to socializing at events, the social terrain of the scene can be quite awkward beyond pleasantries and compliments. On Leticia's terms, "There's a lot of crews and I think they don't talk to each other that much". These distances expand as you cross genres and geographies and languages that comprise the Montreal. Benedicto theorizes the scene by recognizing the unintentional spaces within this cultural terrain: "the scene is a space that fragments even as it expands; it is at once the effect of the agglomeration of circulating forms, the attenuation of space, and incessant narrowing and ramification" (13). Danji retells anecdotes of attending events where he knew no one and was confused by the social expectations. He suggests that this type of extraversion is not for everyone, that he "pretty consciously went on a mission of trying to seek out disparate strands of people putting on parties".

Jesse's youthful experiences are a reminder of Montreal's techno history. He described monthly journeys on rented school buses to raves in other cities of the North

East. From grade 10 onwards his crew would pile into a rented bus in the evening, end up in Boston or Ottawa, dance till noon the next day then return to Montreal. His descriptions of these late 1990's DIY raves that occurred in unregulated spaces like barns and warehouses were exciting. Upon reflection, it was for me a representation of the idealized image of 90's rave culture that continues to inspire the scene. I was surprised when he described those practises dying out, replaced by the energy that accompanied the opening of Montreal's first electronic dance clubs, like Sona and Stereo. He explains, "instead of traipsing around into weird obscure warehouses we were like 'wow we got a club!' That was pretty intense". I reflected on the charge purpose-built clubs would have elicited in comparison to the aesthetic disjuncture of fields or barns and warehouses. Long journeys and muddy clothes replaced by the sleek surfaces and the smooth sounds of clubland. Stewart comes to mind: "the body surges. Out of necessity, or for the love of movement" (Stewart 113). Industry and capital holds fast to these surges, building infrastructures around them, "groping for what to make of the way it [the body] throws itself at objects of round perfection" (113). Jessie linked ravers with connections to the urban wealth enclave of Westmount to the appearance of the new clubs. An infrastructure was built around this recognizable – and profitable – cultural energy. In a similar movement, Stewart describes wealth rushing to Vermont to shore up the rural Vermont aesthetic, part of a way of life that that was in danger of being erased by changing times. In both cases wealth's 'shoring up' of cultural energy attempts to fix social and cultural processes by centralizing aesthetics and material forms.

There is perennially popular club, Datcha, in the Plateau. At some point in the last year they added a large neon sign with the club's name above the door. When I mentioned how the new sign seemed to draw an increasingly young, more 'mainstream' looking crowd, Jesse exclaimed with understanding "I'm friends with the owner and he says 'whatever man, making money now!'"

**Where Underground Meets Capital**

Like myself, all interviewees are suspicious of the "business mindset" and alluded to the hold capital has on the mainstream of electronic music. Danji thought that the

electronic music scene was dominated by motivations that were “inside the capitalist paradigm of self-interest”. Referring to a once popular space in the basement of lofts at Parc and Beaubien Leticia noted, “the owners started doing sketchy shit and people were like ‘what the fuck’ and realized that their only goal was to make money and they didn’t care what was going on in those spaces”. In this direction, Stewart opines that “thought is not the kind of thing that flows inevitably from a given ‘way of life,’ but rather something that takes off with the potential trajectories in which it finds itself in the middle” (128). The long running venue La Plante, of which Danji is a founding member, is organized as a collective, a form that is more in line with the scene’s ethos. Leticia describes how “It’s a house on paper. It doesn’t say on the website: book our venue. It’s more undergrou…word of mouth” (8). There’s intensity around little words that populate the lore of alternative dance music histories. Leticia’s hesitancy at using ‘underground’ perhaps hints at the tension between underground and more mainstream capitalist approaches to dance music. In the words of Stewart “people might be touched by it, or hardened to its obnoxious demands. But either way, a charge passes through the body and lingers for a little while as an irritation, confusion, judgment, thrill, or musing” ( 39).

Words like underground are at once integral to self-definitions of the scene and are invoked as images and experiences that are marketed to by capital. At a talk for the 2017 Montreal techno festival MUTEK, where serious techno-intelligentsia congregate, a Berlin based festival director declared the underground dead. There was no disagreement on the panel or request for further explanation. A few nights later, sitting at the free stage at the Place-des-Arts plaza, I stared at a can of beer made by a local brewpub – an odd place with a gleaming ceramic interior located on the edge of Park-Extension, one of urban Montreal’s remaining neighborhoods for low-income and immigrant populations. The beer’s label was printed on a white matte sleeve; the typeface stencil cut to reveal the aluminum can produced in time for the festival and indicating that this beverage was HarricannaxMutek. The aesthetic of the can matched the festival’s industrially machined signage – white powder coated metal with large plastic board signs carrying perhaps one too many san-serif fonts – that stuck out from the surrounding city and directed festivalgoers to various venues. The operation was increasingly difficult to differentiate from other major music festivals, but perhaps the

most ‘hip’ version. The design language likely meant to categorize and professionalize the panoply of events made the experience alienating and pseudo-corporate. Recognizing my discomfort, I reflected on my deep suspicion that alternative cultural scenes are increasingly beholden to infusions of capital from corporate entities while the cultural imagination is shaped by the organizational logics of these entities. When I asked DJs who were performing at the MUTEK festival about their participation, answers were guarded. Straw’s clearheaded explanation of the co-option of 1980’s punk scenes by music labels around the United States singled the “ongoing monitoring of alternative rock culture… so as to discover careers susceptible to further development” (Straw 1991 377). MUTEK’s impressive mechanisms for bringing the avant-garde of the local and international techno scene and presenting them at first rate venues also involve by over-designed signage, custom micro-brew beer and an operational army of unpaid volunteers, on whose labor the festival seems to float. Are these the representational effects of a new iteration of capital that alchemizes the lucky of music scenes with hybrid cultural-corporate entities attuned to subcultural capital? Are these efforts to create hyper affecting sonic geographies and seductive built environments meant to convince young people of the cultural gravitas of corporate backers? A couple months later a popular queer party called LIP publicized their all-night party as “LIP Underground”, to distinguish their parties in bars from those in unregulated, all-night venues.

**No Utopia**

The incursion of capital points to the ways in which the scene is arranged as highly individualist. Straw, borrowing from Jane K. Kowan, patterns the contradictions of the dance floor as simultaneously engrossing and reflexive, a condition guaranteed by “the intervention of differences which fracture that unity” often wistfully associated with dance. Notably, individualising processes hierarchize DJ and dancer practices, ensuring that the “composition of audiences at dance clubs is likely to reflect and actualize a particular state of relations between various populations and social groups” (Straw 1991 379-380). Leticia recognizes this individualism, describing it as an all-too-common trap where you catch yourself “looking at other people’s success and being like, ‘ah shit I’m

not doing enough' or like 'this person doesn't deserve this'". Similar anti-social tendencies are traced in memories of the 90's: "that's why when cocaine started entering it became really segregated, people just started splintering of into little pods, saying "don't invite that person, don't invite...'". The intersection of multiple conflicting tendencies that move participants closer or farther apart to be expected when navigating scene with a horizon littered by fantastical and hedonistic visions of success, community and artistic production. Benedicto suggests that the way that these fantasies look and feel is a function of the ordering of the imaginary: "*fantasies* or *fantasy-constructions* order apprehension and constrain the shape of dreams", that must be built on "images" or "raw cultural material" (59).

Considering the passage of forces and forms through bodies and their arrangement in social worlds, I invoke Stewart's suggested re-conceptualization of subjecthood: "circuits, bodies, moves, connections. It takes unpredictable and counterintuitive forms. It's lived through a series of dilemmas: that action is always a reaction; that the potential to act always includes the potential to be acted on" (86). In my interviews, I came to uncover movements and actions that were rearranging the scene. These rearrangements are often action against the status quo. I was made aware of an only partially articulated recognition of other possible arrangements of things, forces and people that indicate other directions for social and cultural output. These halfway movements, budding arrangements and newfound understandings are a source of energy for continuing. Leticia described a conversation she had with a successful male DJ who plays at the world-renowned afterhours club Stereo, who recognized and came to envy *what was working* in the queer scene, "when those parties are great and the DJs get really good, and the scene grows and there's a following and they're like "oh what's going on over here, I want to play those parties'. No you have other parties you can play at… go play those parties!"

# CHAPTER 3
# INSIDE

This chapter recounts my interactions with Montreal's alternative techno scene. It is structured as a narrative that follows myself, as reveller-researcher, as I move through an event space during a dance party in the Chabanel neighbourhood and recollect memories of other dance parties that are elicited by this night of experience. I gathered data for this chapter over three months of field research, using the method of sensory ethnography described in the Chapter 1. During the research phase I attended weekly underground electronic dance music events in Montreal, experiences that became 'Night Notes' the morning after events. The writing process for this chapter involved refining flashes of vibrant memory into poetic descriptions of my experiences. As explained in the methods section in Chapter 1, this approach is an example of a set of contemporary ethnographic writing methods that acknowledge that "a multitude of ways of knowing and telling exist side-by-side" (Richardson 961). I avoid heavy analysis of these descriptions to let the reader sit with the rhythms of my retelling, with the intention that the previous two chapters will act as an interpretive framework. In the words of Benedicto, "I do this in a manner informed by the asseveration that the structure of an ethnographic text suggests the shape of its object" (20). By describing movement through a building and evening, branching off into anecdotes from other events, winding through similar memories and back to the night in Chabanel, this chapter situates the reader within the affective interstices I encountered.

❖

Another party at a former factory in Chabanel. The prospect hovers between exciting and routine following a series of events thrown in Montreal's garment district. The venue is north along St. Laurent, above Highway 40, where the island slopes steadily towards the north shore. Heavy traffic cuts through this artery, office lined and unapproachable in comparison with Montreal's pedestrian-friendly Main, the eponymous southern portion of

the avenue. The building, a non-descript one-story, sits close to the blacktop. Tucked around a corner and away from the street, an unmarked brown door swings onto a small steel landing. Below ground level, a brightly lit room beckons entrees. People lined near two individual occupancy toilets stare up at newcomers who clamber, legs first into the room. The buzz and fluorescence of overhead lighting is twofold-sobering. A metal door rattles, cueing entrees to their purpose for the evening. Technospace is pressing in; the perpetual bad neighbour.

The darkness through the door ensures 15 seconds of visual disorientation marked by the jarring inability to apprehend the scale or configuration of the room entered. The sonic landscape offers some recourse for orientation: the location of the speakers can be approximated and the movement of sounds reveals the space partially. These moments of confusion are experienced throughout technospace: The intermittent removal of visual information demands consultation with other faculties, like the auditory, the proprioceptive and the imaginative. When the lighting changes attention scatters and latches onto other sensory-understanding structures pell-mell, a reordering of attentive energy. Stewart describes the attentive shuffle encouraged by the litany of attractions and activities in the contemporary day, the flight through a procession of forms that require different arrangements of perception. She suggests that the reorientations ensure that “[a]ttention is distracted, pulled away from itself. But the movement also makes it wakeful, at attention. Confused but attuned” (10).

In techno space my attention is hyper-activated by flashing lights and the patches of afterglow that hover in space. The crowd is questionably real. Darkness settles over the person inside the people, erasing their looks, dress, body language. Closing my eyes, light passes through lids that guard the imaginary, filling it with patterns. When eyes are open, the limits of the room appear distended, formless. Light, smoke and deep shadows make the space endless. This merges interior and exterior sensory experience so that gradations of light and dark supersede my awareness of myself within an environment. Under these conditions I can play with mental forms unbounded, as though basement and thinking space have become an exploded stage of mental action. Articulating visual information with imaginary space occasion’s constant reassessment of the veracity of my surroundings. Glimpses suggest and re-suggest.

When discussing the limiting of orthoscopic optics – where the visual field is reduced to a slit – Virilio describes that the "[t]he choice offered by the forking path of perception is clear; the more readily you accede to the scenes that unfold before you, the more consistency you give your existence" (2000 38). Standing stationary within the crowd, a succession of flashes makes the inhabitants of the room familiar. I read affective states and thoughts onto these bodies, dissecting my experience through nearby avatars. Here is a halfway legible world whose almost real figures can reconfigure within a half beat, leaving me to re-establish understanding. As is with Virilio, the reduction of the visible field encourages "perceptionless perception" (39). The imaginary pushes towards the continuously unreachable ideal of "perceptual faith" (40).

The rate of (re)evaluation of my surroundings suggests intensive involvement and energetic investment in contextual understanding, a state where "your existence suddenly becomes *commutative* with an environment to which you lend credence" (41). Moving about space complicates already tumultuous perceptive reasoning – the night becomes a feat of sensory unknowing, but always trying to understand. In certain venues the imprint of darkness is pursued down long hallways or into corners, relaxation spaces away from the dance floors, hidden alcoves of soft-touch surfaces that suggest talking, napping, drug taking or sexual activity. As I move through these hideaways it's hard to see boundaries, bodies are interwoven and imprecise. Small movements are absorbed by the dark and action, or its phantom, is assumed. Stewart explains her unease at noticing an odd, out-of-place object in an otherwise seamless environment, which upon closer inspection shocks her into reassessment of her emplacedness. This object is "[p]erched on the unpredictable or unimagined edge of the ordinary, it takes on the full charge of potential's two twisted poles" (24).

The ordinary is relational, and in technospace it must come to be understood slowly according to the equilibrium of this particular night in comparison to that of previous nights. Stewart suggests, "[d]isparate things come together differently in each instance, and yet the repetition itself leaves a residue like a track or a habit—the making of a live cliché." (Stewart 30). At certain venues, event-goers who stay to the end of the party experience a perceptual realignment that reveals the dark's partial forms. Dawn reorganizes the cliché of the party established during the night. The sun rises warm

through fogged plate glass windows. I watch the disk waver upwards and crest the low roofs that stretch out to the east of the city. The people revealed are recognizable, some as acquaintances or near neighbours, and we trade glances as the careful scenography of a dark techno party dissolves. For a few moments the space feels new, the sun providing a different sensorial mapping of a familiar room. Everyone smiles. The distance between people, the sweat on tired bodies and the white cube we dance in all briefly gleam.

Occasionally at events visuality is heightened for safety reasons. At a femme-focused event called 9/9 there's strings of faerie lights and a projector displaying 3D rendered graphics. A variety of otherworldly landscapes overlaid with human body parts (hands, feet, eyes) move through ground and sky according to other laws of gravitational attraction. The projection and lights, while a focal point, emit a glow that wraps around bodies, rendering social behaviour visible. These interventions serve to create observable interactions between partygoers. Harassment often takes form in dark venues. This party demands female representation at the DJ booth and refuses the historical silence around gender-based intimidation in the crowd.

Back in the dark basement in Chabanel, I adjust to the visual conditions and notice the small team sitting at a table in the dark, waiting to collect money for tickets and stamp wrists. They stare up with the calm eyes of those settled to a task. What a peculiar vantage to watch disoriented bodies enter a space for the first time. It reminds me of a night spent as a volunteer doorperson at an event a month prior. Around 2 am I leave the dance floor and arrive at the entrance table, on time for the shift Catherine had scribbled out on piece of loose leaf. Nearby stands a man who acts as though he's in charge of the ticketing table. I assume he's part of the event staff, that this is why I recognize him from somewhere. We're in a space called Poisson Noire that's probably zoned as an apartment and looks vaguely like one. The long double room, run by a collective, hosts small concerts and dance parties. This person responds to my questions slowly while directing significant attention to scanning incoming bodies as they move to pay or show stamped wrists. The entry table is engulfed by a wingback and decorative lamp. It's an unexpectedly cozy workstation wedged against the dance floor.

My new colleague gesticulates at the technologies of tracking and accounting around the little table: a paper where he's noted the number of entrees, the guest list with names carefully crossed out, and the half-full money belt, explaining these systems seriously. When he's done he hovers nearby and swoops back regularly to check up. He avoids eye contact to focus on the money belt and entry list, cutting through the music and activity of the space with his attention. The responsibility of overseeing finances and the flow of entrants is obvious on his body. I've heard about problems with 'sketchy people' showing up at afterhours venues in the area lately, but I'm not sure how to judge if someone shouldn't be let in. I don't want to ask and be recognized as the outsider. I pay close attention to the tiny desk space. The music and social atmosphere lose their immediacy as I work. My colleague returns still. I tell him it's okay, I have it covered, and he leaves looking stressed, says he will go relax, but each time comes back soon after, seemingly pulled by responsibility over celebratory space, over what's happening. I suspect he's feeling guilty about moments of relaxation during periods of acute responsibility. If I enjoy myself for more than five minutes at a self-produced event I feel the itch to get moving again. Near the DJ booth one of the organizers set up a space for equipment along the side of the small stage. Someone mentions how this organizer was always nearby and extremely attentive, observing and being particular about how DJs left their equipment: where it sat, what it was touching.

A narrow flight of stairs cues me to arrivals and by the time they cross the threshold into the room I've trained my eyes to their wrists, ready to scan for stamps. Occasionally someone stops before the booth, making eye contact and requesting entrance. They appear to process the new environment while deferring to my movements, almost mimicking the way I'm behaving in this space, as they wait to be inside. They look about and remove their coats. The real-time sense making that these people seem to be engaging in is, "a potential mapping of disparate and incommensurate qualities that do not simply "add up" but instead link complexly" (Stewart 30). I imagine them acclimatizing to this specific arrangement of things, the dynamics and rhythms of this arrangement.

Someone tries to walk by the desk without a stamp and feigns confusion when I ask them to reveal their inner wrist for proof of entry. Later, I hail someone and he stops

mid-step, ‘I’m friends with the DJ’ he mumbles. He avoids meeting my gaze, his eyes occupied with longing for the party. It reminds me of the occasions when I’ve tried to get into venues for free, steeling myself against the still bouncer who’s focused on sensing those who don’t belong, the ones who haven’t paid their dues. There’s observable confidence that comes with being granted ‘official’ access and feeling the sensorium of the party. Catching the uninitiated through their movements draws attention to way that boundaries affect bodies. When I’ve tried to sneak through this barrier of attentiveness, only the heaviest entryway traffic or the most embodied feeling of belonging has gained me entrance. While working my eyes are drawn to stiff backs, tight steps and eyes that strain to be avoided. There’s a quiet tension at the entry that measures the protected opening to a world. The signs of a worlding aware of itself. Stewart enlists Alphonso Lingis (1993), recounting an anecdote about Siberian miners extinguishing each cigarette smoked on their back of their hands, to mark their insider status, a symbol of the beginning and end of a world. She suggests, “the abstracted sign of collective identity – the scar tissue on the back of everyone’s hands [from intentional cigarette burns] – not only retains its tie to the problems of sense and sociality but demonstrates, or proposes, an extreme trajectory” (Stewart 40). The miners recognize the need to affirm the boundaries of their exclusively harsh club, mating the sensory extremity they experience to their painful mark of membership. They reaffirm their miner identity continuously; this act is an ever-present bouncer that keeps tally of their commitment to belonging.

The wrist marks at underground events highlight a different type of sensory and social arrangement. Insiders share an understanding of the atmosphere created on this specific night, the sensory and social all-togetherness that characterizes this party and connects it to other events within the scene. There is a collective valuation of the conditions experienced, and the work involved in actualizing these conditions. Paying for entry and the mark of the stamp signifies a valuation of the scene. The ordering of these collective experiences entails “ideas or problems performed as a kind of involuntary and powerful learning and participation” (40). Volunteering ‘on door’ for a friend’s party that I want to succeed, I care about patrolling entrance. I make sure to check all wrists,

enacting concern for the affective fold created inside. It feels like something worth protecting.

Halfway through my door shift my hungry body seems to be eating itself, so the organizer brings me half of a stale croissant from her bag. I'd forgotten to eat properly, again, and this corner near Beaubien and Parc is a night-time food desert. I've had to end many nights early out of hunger. Some friends come prepared with protein bars and trail mix they eat on breaks, outside in circles with the smokers. I eat the demi-croissant and watch the bouncer watch the party. In the cramped entryway it's almost impossible not to watch his large form. The two of us interact smoothly off the bat, although largely nonverbally – conversation is limited by the noise and guided by the necessity of sharing information related to the 'front-of-house'. I adjust my behaviour by observing him, a consideration of word and movement that opens up the small space of the entryway. It's like we're both striving towards spatial agreement, a partner dance in this diminutive space. As people enter he slows them at the top of the stairs and I verify their permissibility at the desk. Collaboration seems to involve silent agreement about what it is we are protecting or granting access too, and our action imbues this orientation onto entrees as we slow their movement into this protected site.

Later on, a small person in snowboard apparel tries to walk past me. I tell him he has to pay, and he tries to convince me to let him in for free, "Look at me, I'm not flash". Perhaps angling for entrance under the 'pay what you can/no one turned away' door policy that often directs door staff at alternative events. He's too aggressive though. The demeanour does not match the ideological implement he petitions. He tries many lines of flight away from dealing with the necessity of payment. The front is tied up as he holds eye contact and continues to talk, making it difficult to disengage from the interaction. We are stuck. At a licenced establishment the staff reaction would likely be harsher. A member of the collective appears beside me and gets involved in the conversation, but still it drags on as he switches between flirting, pleading and getting annoyed when his attempt to be beyond us, to feel the way the party is coming together, fails. She turns to talk to me exclusively and he becomes agitated about being cut from conversation, stepping close to regain our attention.

Around the same time a large man arrives at the top of the stairs and is quickly denied entry by the bouncer. Is this a ‘shady person’? Something was ‘off’ about this guy, I’m told later on. There’s an on-the-spot decision to deny him. The bouncer approaches and quietly asks me to stand facing the entrance while he faces me. He extends to full height with his hands on hips, his back to the big man denied entry. The bouncer’s face is tight as he stares straight ahead. Over his shoulder the man denied looks with frustration and longing at the crowd before the DJ.

On the night of the Chabanel party there’s more room to breath. The entrance table is at the short end of an “L” shaped room, while the DJ booth, speakers and dance floor take up the corner of the shape. This is a different setup from previous parties at this venue, before the DJ booth and speakers were in the farthest corner of the room, tucked away at the end of the space. That other arrangement felt more hidden, almost comically more ‘underground’. Perhaps this is because both and dancers were around a corner along the darkest wall of the room. Something feels obvious or commercial about seeing the DJ booth/dance floor upon entrance. The memory of dancing on this night is flashes of heavy bass compressing my chest cavity. It’s a feeling of physical pressure, like a strong hug. I’m isolated by the sound waves around me. This barrier overpowers the communicative faculties of my body and fills the air with sonic information that demands attention and interpretive work.

Occasionally this sonic field is physically painful, like a night across town where I feel the low quality of speakers in high frequencies that crackle in ear. I mention this to a friend standing nearby. He describes how the ear amplifies sounds that fall within the human vocal range and explains the mechanism by which this happens, but I lose track of his words. The information is too complicated for this environment. His explanation draws my attention to the effect and seems to enhance it. These conditions make conversations difficult; you have to speak loudly with heads inclined mouth to ear. I angle my mouth some degrees away from his ear canal to avoid yelling directly into this already overdriven sense organ. After words are spoken our heads pull apart to convey corresponding facial expressions. This scrambles the familiarity of verbal exchange and destabilizes meaning making. In these environments I give more weight to the words of the other, assuming the agreeability of what they say. Otherwise the possible

interpretations are overwhelming. While analyzing everyday music listening, Tia De Nora expounds on the interpretative work of conversation. She details the robustness of conversation, its adaptability. Conversation can occur in a range of settings and conditions and always involves the continuous co-structuring of meaning. A complicated feat, “we draw, into the vortex of our interpretive activities, a range of ‘relevant’ contextual features that help to clarify the meaning of what is going on or what is being said” (De Nora 2000 37). In techno space the contextual features for interpreting the other are limited by the overpowering music that necessitates bobbing heads and mouth-to-ear exchange. This slows the interactive loop. In these conditions there’s relief in seeing the corner of a smile or slight nod – confirmation of understanding, connection. The process of feedback is dependent on the play of forces, “the interactional level where articulations – links – between humans, scenes and environments are actually produced, and where frames of order come to be stabilized and destabilized in real time” (40).

Some nights the interactional ‘situations’ suggested by the overwhelmingly loud bass are comfortable and I don’t think about conversation. The people around me feel both near and far. The sonic profile of these events stages a warping, rearranging my understanding of proximity and interactive potential. One night, I’m wearing a long plastic coat that crackles as it falls, drawing attention to the reaches of my limbs and the timing of my steps. When dance floors are busier or I’m wearing supple clothes, the boundaries of my own body are less remarkable. There’s always a spot on the dance floor where the dancers’ bodies are denser and the pressure from people nearby transmits the movement of others against them, a negotiation of our togetherness. On certain evenings during these bodily encounters our extremities work in unison, feet pounding the floor together. There’s little bumping. A collective attention to the tactile, visual and sonic that make dancing a collaborative effort. In these moments the established links between self, sonic, other and environment destabilize. The identities of individual existents are less recognizable and in this new arrangement I’m confronted by my sensory expectations of objects, people and environment. These categories seem obnoxious and stiff. This disorder is perhaps just a reordering that suggests a subtly other ontological structure. Vivieros de Castro grapples with the difficulty of levelling

existents in western thought: “actual beings – beings that when they appear to be nothing else but themselves, but their identities, are apparently as unreal and difficult to think about within the Amerindian situation as differential/relational beings are for us” (De Castro 2013 27).

These fluid dance floors usually coincide with sound that is so coaxing, so suggestive of movement that dancing feels like an invocation. On these occasions, like at Catherine’s party 9/9, dancing isn’t effort. It’s a sort of attentive communion with music and space and people, and I scan the crowd for other dancers who are noticeably ‘in’ it. We share smiles that seem knowing while taking in each other’s engagement with sounds. The glances suggest recognition of a reordering, or deordering of interactive hierarchies, where “It is not a question of erasing the contours but of folding and thickening them, diffracting and rendering them iridescent” (De Castro 45). Being watched and watching in return feels comfortable, communitarian. I observe the different steps people use to make sense of the music’s rhythmic components. I’m dancing on stage as the DJ’s play back to back, switching every few tracks, and the set becomes heavier, more glitch filled. There’s more stamping around me. The space above heads is clear. I imagine the warm air kicked up, swirling above bodies.

The music is carrying on around me as I lose my connection with the sound. This is when I notice the cramped dimensions of Poisson Noire, and the speakers start to sound noticeably rough in ear; the highs are too high and strong. My ears ring but I feel at ease for a little while longer, sinking into my steps and closing my eyes to dance. I watch Lucas from afar. Catching their eye we move together slowly through dance. I notice release on their body and meet through it. Lucas’s expressive movements catch the eyes of those dancing around us, and I focus on their sudden changes of direction, catching the quick reversals of their hands as they slice the hot air.

Connection to the music and those around me is fickle. Some nights, I’m struck by the aggression in movement and sound. Other nights I’m self-conscious of my expression, my interpretation of the sonic landscape. I feel too visible, out-of-place in unfamiliar terrain, conscious of the need to move with care and precision. On certain occasions the self-expression of those I’ve arrived with is surprising. It’s as though I’ve come to understand them in a certain way, they’ve established a certain mood through

conversation, then we begin dancing and something else entirely is conveyed. One night I notice that a friend locked in small tight movements is focused on maintaining eye contact with me. Not accustomed to this in technospace, I drop her gaze, looking to the floor and movement of my feet. Something's embarrassing. The sound carries on around me, suggesting a path of movement which attendees heed, continually trying to meet and match the changing rhythms. Foot shufflers and head bobbers to the bodies deep in the dance.

As the dance floor fills and people move in unison, the floor sags as a marker of collective alignment. The wood groans and responds through flex. Standing still the travel of the floor is noticeable. As the dancing continues I feel watched, and attempt complicated steps that catch the floor in unpredictable patterns. The music carries us forward. Uninterrupted I feel it difficult to think of leaving this nexus of communion. The occasional blow of fog pulls me inward. In these moments I move proprioceptively. These seconds of aloneness drive me most sharply into the flux between bodily and cerebral action.

At Chabanel my connection to the music is weak and my attention turns to critical thoughts about the event. It feels like we're pretend dancing, mocking the felt experience of an overused cultural form. Dancing is necessary movement to keep myself from being outed as phony, unfeeling.

Towards the end of the evening Lucas and I explore the length of the room, where a fabric barrier sets apart the back corner of the long end of the L shaped basement space. In an area that seems to be reserved for the small crew associated with the party, people sit about on beanbags around makeshift tables involved in relaxed conversation. There's a low-fi geodesic dome above them, a small fort for the initiated. A similar lounge exists at the popular after-hours Poisson Noire. There the insider's space is separated by a door marked 'private'. At a party shortly after I worked the event 9/9, I entered the room without knocking, a motel-like kitchen-living room filled with dirty dishes. Luckily someone who worked that party with me is there and she references the persistent young man who tried to persuade his way into the event for free. The conversation quickly turns to the space itself, Poisson Noire. Two men recap a night where they didn't leave till 8:45 am, laughing in semi-incredulity at the scenario as they

describe their antics. Someone new enters and teeters about the room. He's hailed knowingly, she whispers that he's an incredible guitarist and tries to persuade him to play for us.

In the makeshift back room at Chabenel we cross paths with a small man who holds unblinking eye contact as we introduce ourselves. We mention we're exploring, pointing towards a door at the deepest corner of the room. He nods slowly and says he'd like to join us. The metal opens onto deep darkness. Our phone lights catch the edges of cast iron sewing machines and masses of rotting thread absorb their power. The air is leaden with disuse and feels solid against the movement and noise behind us. Hard edges mark where the light looses to the dark. A sliding door set into the wall opens to reveal a freight elevator. Inside a corrugated steel floor radiates iridescence. We step into the box, I press a large green button on the wall and elevator springs to life, lifting away from the basement floor. Marks on the walls slide downwards and out of sight, and when the pneumatic whine cuts we find ourselves overlooking the building's loading bay. People chat or drink beer in the parking lot while city buses corral towards a depot beyond a fence. The unexpected way we've moved through and out the building heightens the differences contained by those spaces. We stare onto soft August asphalt, back with the people. But here they are simple and unattached to the dance floor assemblage. The idea of 'getting fresh air' makes clear sense when you emerge so suddenly from rooms full of charge.

Six months later, It's frigid, -20c, when a woman stumbles down the stairs into the alley before steadying herself on the uneven ice. She bobs about among the little groups of smokers. An obnoxious American man I was introduced to earlier slides up to her side, puts his arm around her and speaks into her ear. The conversation I'm having falters and people suck cigarettes in silence. I glance at their concerned faces and back at the interaction. He seems to be directing her away from the knots of conversation and heading towards the empty alley. We make faces at one another. What is happening? Is the situation predatory or am I misjudging? As they move away the confusion settle into concern. 'This is weird', someone says. There's hesitation when Eli questions if someone should intervene. "Someone" in this moment is the embodiment of values that the scene is striving towards. It's clear that they're heading away from the venue and it's

easy to interpret that she is being led. The tension and our almost action release when she spins about and starts stumbling back towards the entrance. He follows. Are we all catching this correctly? Perhaps they are friends or lovers. Is it rude to intervene? Finally she makes her way back towards the groups of people, something changes between them and he walks away. Relief. We continue watching and Phoebe and Eli decide they will check in with her, see if there is something they can do, perhaps get her a cab.

# CONCLUSION

## TAKING STOCK

This is a project that sustains its intellectual inquiries by making patterns, from my own memories and the memories of cultural producers I'm connected to, about the excesses of social and cultural energy that define the techno music scene in Montreal. This effort is grounded in the literature review of Chapter 1, which explores traditions of inquiry in Sociology, Cultural and Communications studies that choose to parse socio-cultural arrangements from the ground up. These studies were often concerned with microcosms of "street-level" social and cultural life that are described as formally unstructured yet cohesive, organized but without obvious rules. The interest of early sociological work out of the Chicago School of Sociology questioned observed dis-identification of groups of people from dominant values, norms and life ways within the most intimate and proximate spaces of their day-to-day lives. In these spaces people were observed resisting the various structural pressures inciting them to organize their lives normatively. This body of research was curious about experiences of life that were non-normative, but ultimately uninterested in considering the nascent ideologies informing life experiences that were oppositional or critical to dominant power structures. Later the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies re-focused micro-social interest onto the cultural output of youth disprivileged by hegemony. They most frequently explained the distinctive cultural output of various groups as an expression of their powerlessness within the hegemonic order. These often aesthetic research observations were read as establishing standing within their subcultural or amongst other subcultures, but left them ill-prepared for interaction with more powerful social groups. The cultural and stylistic behaviour of the social groups under study became a defining interest of the research, yet this productive excess was largely disregarded as a site of emancipation for these youth. This cultural effusiveness continued amongst successive generations of subcultural participants, the quiet work of creating and maintaining spaces for grassroots cultural production.

With the further reformulation, these research interests developed into the study of cultural scenes in the 1990's. Theorists like Shank and Straw centralized the spaces and experiences engendered by productive work of subjects. The extreme cultural

productivity that generated social worlds was foregrounded in these studies, worlds that were thick and difficult to parse for outsiders. Yet on closer inspection, these scenes were largely informal structures open to constant rearrangement. These theorists noticed that social and cultural energies coalesced and piggybacked on the existing cultural infrastructure of bars and clubs, vocational schools and radio stations. While these sites acted as hubs for scenes, much of the activity within scenes went beyond the expectations of these sites. As I discovered later on in research, much social behaviour and decision-making within the scene was difficult to track or organize. It was not part of any official register maintained by the sites where scene activity occurred, and sudden changes in locations of events or the emergence of new collectives (for example) had to be tracked down via word of mouth or obscure social media posts. Without rule-based governance structures, energies in the scene move in complicated patterns, which Straw attempts to categorize according to three cultural logics borrowed from Miege, De Certeau and Bourdieu.

The queer theorists who've adopted the scene concept struggle to balance the emancipatory social and cultural potential within scenes against the endless fragmenting of social worlds increasingly beholden to the precarious material conditions and stratified power structures determined by late capitalism. Similarly, affect theorists who engage with the feeling of of social interaction under late capitalism trace feeling through social spaces, the bonds between people and their environments. This is done in order to sensitize my analysis to the socially and phenomenologically rich dance floors are forever linked to the conditions of city life. I decided that these sites, where cultural products are consumed and scene life solidifies – if only briefly – are an experiential and affective center around which to speculate on the scene's generative power for cultural evolution. Similar to how Pope analyses Detroit techno and Lawrence New York Disco, there's affective awareness, in the music and the experiences participants bring to the party, that prepares revellers for creative engagement with the party. This continues after it is over, the feelings shared and the beats carried on in body act as a lesson about creating pleasure and culture from challenging circumstances.

In Chapter 2 analysis gathers evidence from conversations I had with four cultural producers about their involvement in the cultural life of the alternative techno scene.

These discussions explore the individual and social experiences of the scene, thoughts which are connected by the semblance of participating in continuous experimentation and recombination of what exists. I interpret these conversations through the literatures outlined in Chapter 1 to probe the conflicted dynamics within the scene and its fraught interactions with wider worlds. The scene binds participants and portends cohesive social beliefs and forms of cultural output. Part of the cohesion stems from the queerness of the scene, a set of social, political and philosophical commitments that devalue mainstream forms of behaviour and interaction. From this atypical social platform I suggest that participants innovate by affirming affective and productive bonds, leading to cultural output that represents and encourages otherness. 'Falling outside' mainstream culture also involves refusing and resisting the insistent (and oftentimes violent and repressive) reproduction of normative social and cultural life. This makes for a scene that is internally combative and self-sequestering. Productive and exploratory queer initiatives within the scene, understood as affective circuits that rearrange social experiences for participants, seem inbuilt with a refusal of the status quo.

In Chapter 3 I describe immersions in the event spaces and packed dance floors that I consider central to the scene. I explore the curious together-aloneness that characterises these spaces, and the sensory and affective upheaval of daytime life at dance parties. The writing attempts to transport the reader and emplace them amongst the intensities that first motivated me to consider this project. I emulate the style of Kathleen Stewart and Bobby Benedicto, whose writing on affect and scenes is filled with the felt intensities they describe. The structuring of experience at dance parties is an affective gamble. The aesthetic simplicity of the spaces and social/cultural hierarchies of music production within the scene can be deeply alienating. The energy, attention and presence on these dance floors feels abundant, while personhood and sociality are creative and playful. My writing is a collection of moments where the affective intensities of the scene pulse vividly. I approach describing my experiences of these environments with a seriousness that I think befits their role in the scene as cultural incubators. In the words of New York DJ, performance artist and writer Juliana Huxtable "[recognizing] the richness of what nightlife could offer, as both a way of forming community but also as a way of…experimenting with the first stages of my art practice and performativity

generally” (Huxtable 2016).

In its totality this project is an affirmation of queer cultural scenes as central to a robust, progressive cultural economy. Queer cultural life is forever ensconced in scenes like the one I study, a context where ‘life’ and ‘art’ are continually overtaking one another. The boundaries between socialization and cultural output are imprecise, and this imprecision is cherished. Aside from the sonic repetition of dance music, this scene provides altogether imprecise experiences. The chance for fleeting pleasure, surprise, incomprehension and belonging continue to pull me out into the night. Over the past few years the venues have changed, many have closed, but regardless of location, the air inside retains the charge of transgressive possibility. This possibility at events is not continuous, and the suddenness of the moments at which the night turns flat, the nights where there’s no air at all, or only forceful anomie, are indicative of the continual co-creation of social possibility. The fleetingness of moments of connection should be recognized and treated as openings onto nascent socio-cultural potential. Participants gather and experience pleasure and social possibility on the edge of moments that could always go stale. Guarding the fickle vibrancy of sites from the reproducible ordering principals of more dominant social structures is necessary for the health of alternative culture. To this end, securing the continual output of these cultural scenes involves recognizing and valuing their idiosyncratic movements and supporting the purposeful disengagement and self-sequestering from normative culture and all its trappings.

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# Appendix 1

CERTIFICATION OF ETHICAL ACCEPTABILITY
FOR RESEARCH INVOLVING HUMAN SUBJECTS

| | |
|---|---|
| Name of Applicant: | Stephen Sherman |
| Department: | Faculty of Arts and Science\Communication Studies |
| Agency: | N/A |
| Title of Project: | Notes from (Techno) Underground |
| Certification Number: | 30007391 |

Valid From: February 26, 2018 To: February 25, 2019

The members of the University Human Research Ethics Committee have examined the application for a grant to support the above-named project, and consider the experimental procedures, as outlined by the applicant, to be acceptable on ethical grounds for research involving human subjects.

Dr. James Pfaus, Chair, University Human Research Ethics Committee