Introduction

In Carol, the 2015 Todd Haynes-directed adaptation of Patricia Highsmith’s novel The Price of Salt, there is a short scene in a music store. The narrative concerns two women who fall in love with each other: Carol, the older, beautiful woman from wealth and privilege; and Therese, the younger shopgirl whose desire for Carol leads her on a difficult process of self-discovery. The scene at the music store comes midway in the film, after Therese and Carol have tentatively begun to see each other as friends, gaining mutual intimacy without explicitly acknowledging their attraction toward one another. While out with her boyfriend, Richard, Therese enters a music store to buy a record for Carol that she had previously played for her. While making her purchase, Therese turns around to see two women who stare at her. (Figure 1) Obviously coded as lesbians with their dark suits and the cropped hair and glasses that one wears, not to mention the predatory looks they direct at Therese, they offer a stark contrast to Carol, the woman who conforms to Therese’s heavily classed fantasy of upward mobility and normative beauty.

Though minor, this scene speaks in important ways about homosexual life in the US at midcentury, and the possibilities that popular music offered queers to circulate in everyday life as normative consumers and also connect discreetly with other queers. While the identity of the women who cruise Therese as lesbians may be clear to her, it is also entirely believable that she could have been in the same store with them on another occasion and remained completely oblivious to their attention; it is only through exploring her own sexuality and looking with greater awareness at the world around her that she recognizes the intention of the women’s looks. Therese’s navigation of the physical world via her unspoken desire points to tactical practices of queers to avoid recognition as such: the deniability of actions as queer by virtue of their normality. There is nothing unusual or criminal about patronizing a music store or looking at another female customer, although the intensity of the women’s looks is nonetheless striking. Likewise, although the lesbian’s choice in clothing seems obvious as queer through Therese’s eyes, she looks through a universe that flatters the traditionally feminine as embodied in Carol. Stated differently, in practice there was nothing unusual about women wearing suits in US cities in the 1950s; they may not have looked especially feminine, but they also didn’t seem out of place either.
Importantly, the music store provides a terrain on which queers might meet or recognize each other while also minimizing the threat that others would recognize them.

As a contemporary presentation of entertainment rather than the representational world pictured by *Carol*, the 2013 Academy Awards Ceremony also foregrounded the importance of musicality for queers, albeit in a drastically different fashion. Informally framed as a tribute to the movie musical, the show featured several performances by the Los Angeles Gay Men’s Chorus (LAGMC) as a gag. This gag often took on absurd expression, as when the chorus sang “We Saw Your Boobs” about the nudity of several female actresses in the audience in previous films. Later in the show—after Barbra Streisand performed a musical tribute to the recently deceased Marvin Hamlisch—host Seth MacFarlane introduced the cast of the 2003 film version of *Chicago* with the quip, “We now want to bring out the stars of that game changing musical because we’re concerned that tonight’s show isn’t gay enough yet.” There is nothing particularly “gay” about *Chicago* other than that it is a musical, and thus equivalent in the contemporary American imaginary with homosexuality. Likewise, while the opening performance of the broadcast might be shrugged off, it nonetheless demonstrates the way that the discursive equivalence of homosexuality with musicality functions to make queers legible to a mass audience. In essence, the cooperation of the LAGMC in the ceremony provided them with an exceptional platform for mass visibility at the expense of serving as the vehicle for misogynist and homophobic humor. At the same time, the participation of the LAGMC in the broadcast provided a buffer for criticism of MacFarlane’s crass and often offensive jokes by embodying the “liberal” attitudes of the Academy. While apparently simple, the 2013 Oscars demonstrate the continued complexity of mainstream queer visibility, as stereotypes often provide the means to speak even though the words spoken might only rearticulate heteronormative ideas about homosexual nature and affiliation.

*Carol* and the 2013 Oscars broadcast may seem like an unlikely pair, but together they exemplify both sides of this project’s focus: the ways popular music moved queers safely through hostile surroundings, between public, semi-public, and private spaces, for example between the office, the club, the department store, the theater, and the home; and the relation of this circulation to discourse that solidified public perceptions of queers as “musical.” Likewise, it is the goal of this project not only to excavate the daily practice of queers around music in the early and mid-20th century, but also to historicize and theorize.
importance of queer musical pathways for conditioning language used by queers to escape close scrutiny in public, and also heteronormative language derived from surveillance and profiling that associated queers—especially gay men—with musicality. This project’s title, “To Know the Words to the Music,” is a phrase taken from a gay slang dictionary that means, “to be acquainted with the local gay slang.” I have chosen this title because it elegantly indicates the (taken for granted) presence of music as a quotidian structure that conditions both specific patterns of physical circulation and also the shape and form of coded language.

The historiographic gambit of this project is in no way straightforward, and its potential pitfalls are many. Primarily, the lack of reliable records of any sort regarding the daily practice of queers before Gay Liberation in the late 1960s and early 1970s make the writing of earlier history near impossible, at least from a historical perspective that relies on empiricism. For the most part, this lack of evidence—enacted by design, as queer life persisted through public deniability for most of the 20th century—has blocked the writing of queer history or history about queers. The main exceptions are George Chauncey’s Gay New York and Allan Berubé’s Coming Out Under Fire, both phenomenal and impressive works that rely on personal accounts and interviews, i.e. fully normative historiographic methods. Writing on the complexity of the task of the queer historian, Mark Lynn Anderson notes the following about the preference for empirical historicism:

In other words, the reasoning goes, if there are, say, lesbian meanings or identifications detectable for a specific historical event, or generated through a particular confluence of cultural texts, then there must be lesbians somewhere in the vicinity; the historian’s task, then, is to seek them out and document them. Not only is such a demand politically and ethically suspect, but it also obscures the historical force and complexity of sexuality as a popular way of knowing and living in the Western world during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.¹

In his book Twilight of the Idols, Anderson builds from this critique of normative history to historicize and theorize the effect Valentino had on the “possibilities of understanding social relations that subtended personality, sexuality, gender and race for U.S. audiences in the 1920s.”² As a historian interested in both queer objects and queer historiography, Anderson goes much farther than many and makes use of accounts in the popular press, theory on sexuality, and the close reading of films starring Valentino. For my purposes, however, such
a methodology is incomplete. In bringing the importance of musical reception to bear not only the study of cinema but also queer subjectivity, my project clashes with dominant understandings in the field of cinema generally and musicals especially. In turn, there is not such a clear lineage of discourse to which I might contribute as there is for Anderson’s addition to star studies.

More importantly, my questioning of the conditions of speaking for queer subjects troubles whatever information I might glean from interviews, were they even possible to orchestrate. I especially agree with Anderson’s distrust of interviews, as an insistence on the “truth of the individual” not only limits what arguments might be considered historically valid, but also fails to consider what has structured a subject’s opinions, recollections, and beliefs. Given the status of the homosexual affiliation with musicality as a truism for queers and non-queers alike (so thoroughly displayed by the 2013 Academy Awards ceremony), I find an approach that esteems interviews as the ne plus ultra of historical information as lax if not negligent.

It may seem that my historical position leaves me, ironically, in the same position as queer scholars who choose to foreground close reading and theory over historical inquiry. However, I remain as historically rigorous as possible throughout this project, and I focus instead on the relations of power that animated the subjectivity of queers and the unique possibilities and potentials that media networks offered them to manage both daily alienation and, later, assimilation into the public sphere as fully speaking subjects. As such, I focus on a wide array of neglected and under-theorized texts, among them collections of sheet music, home magazines, gay travel guides, musical Vitaphone shorts, personal diaries, slang dictionaries, film and music industry records, historical periodicals, and records of gay men’s choruses, among many other sources. These texts provide me not necessarily with the accounts of queers, but rather a nuanced understanding of the way that sonic media conditioned public life as a dominant form of commercialized leisure throughout the 20th century. I use this historical background to theorize the potentials and consequences popular music held for queers who availed of its resources to manage daily repression and the threat of punishment, and, countervalently, create positive affective networks to solidify queer community in a relentlessly homophobic world. As the corpus of materials available to me on the public presence of queers expands tremendously after the
late 1960s, my approach shifts to favor discourse analysis more heavily. However, this analysis remains grounded by the methods and themes established in earlier chapters.

The larger stakes of this project are historiographic, as I seek to reconcile the rigorous writing of history with queer inquiry. As previously stated, this has served as a stumbling point for the field because of the very real lack of definitive evidence of the daily practices of queers. Instead, much queer writing adopts a theoretical stance grounded by an understanding of otherness, and builds from this to develop strategies for reading texts. While the grounds and assumptions of academic inquiry shift constantly (and I don’t imagine myself to speak from a position somehow beyond them), I have found such an approach problematic because it often foregrounds assumptions about what is “queer” rather than the lived practices of queers. Likewise, I don’t believe that a lack of empirical evidence about historical queer subjects should prevent writing about them or the types of experiences they would have had in day-to-day life. Rather, the tools used to interrogate history need to change, and my project is a step in this direction. Accordingly, I tend to use certain terms in a way that diverges from most scholars engaged in queer inquiry. Primarily, I use the word queer to refer to subjects whose sexual preferences don’t conform to heteronormative standards rather than its more common usage to designate a sensibility or approach to reading. The main exception to this is the final chapter, which considers how digital networks have the potential to reshape the discursive formation of sexual identity and invert power relations.

An unfortunate side effect of my approach is that my focus on the analysis of available evidence and patterns of visibility and consumption limits the subjects on which I focus. In practice, my emphasis on popular discourse on homosexuality at midcentury promotes a focus on white gay men. Whenever possible I refer to sources that broaden this perspective, but by and large homosexuality was popularly understood in the US for much of the 20th century as specific to white middle- and upper- class men. This is as much a result of the symbolic threat of white, privileged, and male deviance for the popular American imaginary as it is an index of the ability of white men to pass inconspicuously in segregated public life as normative consumers, or to enjoy the privilege of spending discretionary income without concern. This is not to say that women did not also gain specific forms of mobility through consumption, only that the perceived threat of male homosexuality was far more present in the popular imagination than that of lesbianism. It is my sincere hope that
others will contribute to historical understandings of how media networks encouraged specific forms of mobility and visibility for queer women and queers of color, and I will adapt my methods in the future to accommodate different perspectives.

I organize my project into five chapters: historic accounts of the relationships of queers to space and language constitute the first four chapters, and the final chapter addresses these themes in the present. The first two chapters address spatial circulation and argue that the rise of popular music coincident with modernity offered queers a unique opportunity to cultivate an outwardly normative identity as consumers of music. Donald Webster Cory’s statement about a song that was so ubiquitous in gay bars “that to hear it on the street [was] to know that it [came] from the mouth of a gay person” gives expression to the profound potential of popular music to manage queer visibility.

In Chapter 1 I historicize Cory’s statement by describing the musical networks that unified public spaces such as the street or park, semi-public spaces such as department stores and performance venues, semi-private spaces such as bars and clubs, and fully private, domestic spaces. As articulated by Cory, popular song could convey queers between all of these spaces and simultaneously foster mutual recognition between them, even as their sexual identities remained undetectable to others. In this chapter I demonstrate how music as a durable object for consumption (in the form of sheet music, records, musical instruments, and playback and broadcast technologies) fortified domestic space and also connected to other spaces where music also circulated. Importantly, popular music was a thoroughly modern invention that emerged contemporaneously with the establishment of queer kinship networks within cities, offering these subjects felicitous opportunities to circulate inconspicuously and find each other. The key texts I analyze here are a queer collection of sheet music, home magazines that demonstrate the centrality of musical performance and reception to domestic practice, and early musical (Vitaphone) shorts after the cinema’s conversion to sound that demonstrate the importance of domestic space for visualizing the performance and reception of music. Grounded by theory of female spectatorship by Mary Ann Doane and Miriam Hansen and theory on sexuality from Judith Butler, the latter sections of this chapter historicize the ability of the cinema to appeal to a queer fantasy of equitable circulation and subjecthood in cities in the 1920s and 30s. I follow this chapter with a brief section that situates this argument in relation to dominant understandings of sound cinema and musicals within the field of film studies.
The following chapter builds on the model developed in the first, and demonstrates the ways that bonds between cinema, nation and the musical enlarged patterns of queer spatial circulation during WWII. As the preferred morale booster for troops and the general public, musicals provided new ways for queers to circulate internationally as agents of the US. This chapter makes use of historic records of the distribution of film and music, queer accounts of life in the military, and gay travel guides occasioned by armed service in the 1940s that delineate patterns of circulation both within and beyond the US. While I focus on several Hollywood musicals, the most important text is 1943's *This is the Army* (Michael Curtiz), which was by far the most popular film of the year and also prominently featured drag performance in several musical numbers. I analyze not only the film itself, but also the ways in which it was promoted through official military channels, providing queers with an exceptional form of privilege and cover that distributed queer entertainment as nationalist propaganda.

The following two chapters shift perspective and consider how the musical gave rise to language and systems of meaning, both before and after gay liberation and Stonewall in the late 1960s. Chapter 3 develops the understanding of how musical networks motivated queers through urban space as outlined in the previous two chapters to theorize the relationship between musical material consumption in the home and the solidification of coded, camp language in private and semi-private spaces. Using theoretical tools provided by the field of sociolinguistics and theorists including Jacques Attali, Susan Stewart, Sara Ahmed, and others, this chapter demonstrates the interrelation of musical material culture and systems of language used by queers that could circulate undetected by prying eyes and ears in public. Gay slang dictionaries compiled such language, which often registered the presence of power in mixed spaces through musical terms, especially that of police officers. In turn, camp language had a dual register and conveyed privileged meanings between queers but also encouraged those who overheard them to type them as exceptionally preoccupied with musical entertainment and the performing arts. As demonstrated by writing in the popular press in magazines including *Time*, the 1960s saw a growing popular paranoia about homosexuality and its result in the solidification of stereotypes about gay men that associated them with music and spaces of musical performance. I argue that this stereotype derives not from any essential affiliation between queers and musical entertainment, but rather the way musical networks of circulation and language made
queers vulnerable to profiling and policing in spaces of musical consumption.

Chapter 4 historicizes the ways queers rearticulated common musical stereotypes after Stonewall in order become visible, politicized citizens. While potentially subversive, this association ultimately helped to make American queer identity mainstream. To historicize this process, I refer to a wide variety of case studies. The first part of the chapter focuses on the reception and promotion of the film *The Boys in the Band* (William Friedkin, 1970), and the aggressive promotion of camp musical taste to a popular, heteronormative audience at the Continental Baths. This section demonstrates the way that homosexuality became mainstream as a condoned and fashionable object for popular consumption, and also provided a new market for industries that could cater to homosexual tastes but resist any meaningful support for the queer community. The latter half of this chapter focuses on queer entries into the public sphere later in the 1970s, primarily through a history of gay men’s choruses and early gay ethnomusicology. Moving away from the marketing of queers and camp tastes by heteronormative industry, gay men’s choruses directly marketed themselves and their musical entertainment in an attempt to profit directly from their own labor. In becoming publicly speaking subjects, these queers largely conformed to public expectations and stereotypes about gay musicality in order to conform to popular tastes. This chapter functions as a historical case study for and critique of Judith Butler’s *Excitable Speech*, in which she theorizes the subversive potential of reclaiming languages of profiling and stereotyping.

The final chapter considers the themes of the first four chapters against queer experience in the 2010s, now that digital media have charted new relations to both space and discourse. Specifically, I read the reception of the video “Telephone Remake” (a viral remake of Lady Gaga’s music video for “Telephone” by US soldiers) to demonstrate how musical content can engender discursive resistance to nationalist policy about sexual identity. Drawing heavily on theory developed by diverse voices including Jean-François Lyotard, David Rodowick, Jasbir Puar, Alexander Galloway, and Eugene Thacker, this chapter develops a qualified historical account of how formal content online became complicit in the repeal of the US “Don’t Ask Don’t Tell” policy, which severed protection for queer US soldiers if they divulged their sexual identity. Importantly, this potential operated because of a historical context that marginalized queers, and not because of a more generalized potential of formal content and formal reading.
Throughout this project I circle back to questions of the visibility and legibility of queers, both to the outside world and to their own communities. I explicitly address the larger ramifications of this approach for future scholarship in the conclusion, and propose possible forms it might take. It is my desire that an attention to the historical basis of public queer expression should provide new directions for scholarship in the humanities and the social sciences generally, and encourage self-reflection among queer scholars about the importance of moving beyond and adapting methods that derive from a legacy of oppression. While there may be no feasible alternative to using the tools of the system available to us, that does not mean that we should participate in our own marginalization or essentialization. I hope that this history moves you, and changes how you understand the past and present.

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1 Anderson, Mark Lynn, 74-75.
2 Ibid., 76.
Figure 1: Lesbians at the music store in *Carol* (Todd Haynes, 2015)