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Dragging Music: Towards a Queer Socio-Cultural Semiotics

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Abstract What can queer theory, and drag performance, contribute to music semiotics? This paper proffers 'dragging' as a socio-cultural semiotics that demonstrates how musical meanings are dynamically queered through drag lip-sync performance. Departing from approaches to meaning and semiotics in musicology and popular music studies, I intervene with direct insights from queer theory. I draw out oscillations between queer theoretical perspectives on temporality and (post) structural concepts such as assemblages and mediation as they have been incorporated into music studies. 'Drag', not just an art form, is here developed as a specific kind of spatial-temporal mediation: dragging is understood as the displacement and heterochronization of meaning, where musical objects are dragged 'out of time' and 'out of space' into the alien world of queer experience. Dragging as a conceptual instrument allows us to begin answering questions of how meanings – and their political stakes – coalesce inside and outside, within and without, music.

Introduction

> How can a being take another being into its world, but while preserving or respecting the other's own relations and world?[1]
>
> Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*

An art form that is neither imitative nor figurative, drag lip-sync performance synthesizes a materially and critically processual territory wherein music, with its contested meanings, can be reimagined.[2] In encounters of drag performance, where music is intimately entangled in multiplicities of socio-cultural matter, opposing and often

[1] Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, trans. by Robert Hurley (City Lights Books, 1988), p. 126.
[2] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. by Brian Massumi, 2nd edn (Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), pp. 354–55; Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Routledge, 1990), pp. 188–89.

contradictory meanings overlap and grapple with one another to be heard. Through mapping the mutual mediations of drag and music, whilst mobilizing 'dragging' as a socio-sonographic instrument, it is hoped that we may unpick and analyse musical meaning and its import without effacing its temporally fleeting and spatially slippery complexities.[3]

From the moment a drag performer carves out their stage, bathing in the spotlight (or waiting surreptitiously in darkness), multiplicities of mediations are already at work. Beings, as per the epigraph to this article, are attempting to take each other into their worlds, all while respecting each other's own relations and worlds. When such beings (from musical sounds to audience screams) attempt *to take* each other, what is happening and what is its import? More importantly, as Deleuze asks, *how* does this taken import happen?[4] Which forces, in other words, produce and are produced by sounds and their socio-cultural relations? Born out of a double movement of theoretical speculation (queer theory) and empirical particularity (drag performance), this paper develops the notion and method of 'dragging' as a queer socio-cultural conception of musical meanings, how they are produced, contested, and interpretively sustained (by performers, audiences, critics, theorists, and so on).[5]

In contemporary drag culture, the medium of lip-sync has become a powerful tool in the drag artist's arsenal through which performers drag meanings and interpretations into and out of musical tracks and other sonic materials towards queer futurities.[6] This illumination of a queer horizon is produced through a social hermeneutics wherein the *pluri-potentialities of meanings* – the condition of virtually aggregated meanings, all seeking actualization – are excavated and, ultimately, an immanent queerness is actualized through the critical interpretations made by drag performers, audiences, and their socialities.[7]

This semiotics of popular music is tested out in an analysis of the track 'Creep' by Radiohead as its potentially queer meanings are dragged during a lip-sync performance by the drag artist Vander Von Odd. Dragging here proffers a reimagining of the life cycle of meaning as it travels, socially, through 'regimes of signs'.[8] My understanding of

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[3] Georgina Born, 'Understanding Music as Culture: Contributions from Popular Music Studies to a Social Semiotics of Music', in *Tendenze e Metodi nella Ricercar Musicological*, ed. by Raffaele Pozzi (Olschki, 1993), pp. 211–28 (p. 215); Georgina Born, 'On Musical Mediation: Ontology, Technology and Creativity', *Twentieth-Century Music*, 2.1 (2005), pp. 7–36.

[4] *Happen* is a quirk in this interrogative, with its etymological roots in the Middle English 'hap-', meaning 'chance' or 'occurrence': what chances or occurrences, I am asking, make potential meanings possible and, eventually, actual? See Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Duke University Press, 2010).

[5] Georgina Born, 'Music and the Social', in *The Cultural Study of Music: A Critical Introduction*, ed. by Martin Clayton, Herbert Trevor, and Richard Middleton, 2nd edn (Routledge, 2012), pp. 261–74.

[6] For a historical case of 'stage' versus 'record queens' – when lip-sync was a pejorative for 'talentless' drag artists – see Esther Newton's agenda-setting ethnography of drag performers in America, *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* (University of Chicago Press, 1972). For contemporary accounts, see Carol Langley, 'Borrowed Voice: The Art of Lip-Syncing in Sydney Drag', *Australasian Drama Studies*, 48 (2006), pp. 5–17; Jacob M. Bird, 'Haptic Aurality: On Touching the Voice in Drag Lip-Sync Performance', *Sound Studies*, 6.1 (2019), pp. 45–64; Jacob M. Bird, 'The Cyborg Queen: Lip-Syncing and Posthumanism in ShayShay's "Mutual Core"', *Contemporary Music Review*, 39.5 (2020), pp. 526–43; Merrie Snell, *Lipsynching* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2020).

[7] See William Connolly, *A World of Becoming* (Duke University Press, 2011).

[8] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 129.

such journeys through semiotic regimes comes, monstrously, from queer theory, namely scholars thinking about 'drag' as a temporal and spatial force, where 'dragging' can involve the prolongation of time's movement *and* the physical pulling of an object through space.[9] Theories of drag, as my case study demonstrates, are inspired by and co-dependent on theatrical entertainment traditions where performers, constituting their bodies as instruments, often subvert, play with, and undo social vectors of gender.[10]

The co-dependent relationship between queer theory and queer practice is palpable in much queer thinking, though the parallel movement of theory-practice is most integral to 'dragging' where drag is both a queer art form and a critical queer theory. It is not controversial to state plainly at the outset that much of queer theory targets 'cisheteronormativity', where 'being heterosexual and cisgender' is institutionalized, normalized, and ultimately privileged.[11] Queer and transgender theory have begun to expand their foci to simultaneously examine white supremacist, ableist, and classist cisheteronormativity.[12] Such a complex oscillation between an ontolog*ized* being and normalization (identity and power) demonstrates that queer theory is not just *about* queer life, but rather it is a critical framework (something one *does*) born out of multiply marginalized LGBTQ+ experiences that seeks to destabilize institutionalized and intersectional notions surrounding 'gender' and 'sex(uality)'.[13]

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[9] Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Objects, Orientations, Others* (Duke University Press, 2006); Tom Boellstorff, *A Coincidence of Desires: Anthropology, Queer Studies, Indonesia* (Duke University Press, 2007); Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Duke University Press, 2010); Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York University Press, 2005).

[10] For an account of performance traditions similar to – though culturally and socially different from – Western 'drag', see Jennifer Robertson's exploration of Japanese 'androgyny' (as entangled in a 'surface politics of the body') and its temporally shifting referents through an analysis of the all-male Kabuki and the all-female Takarazuka Revue theatres in Japan. Jennifer Robertson, 'The Politics of Androgyny in Japan: Sexuality and Subversion in the Theatre and Beyond', *American Ethnologist*, 19.3 (1992), pp. 419–42. See also, Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 186.

[11] 'Cisheteronormativity', moreover, demonstrates the complex relationship between 'identity' and 'institutions' that exists in queer theory today: see Margot Weiss, 'Always After: Desiring Queerness, Desiring Anthropology', *Cultural Anthropology*, 31.4 (2016), pp. 627–38.

[12] There is an important genealogy of queer theory in the academy that cannot be fully interpreted and evaluated here; however, it is worth stating clearly that queer theory, in its most cited works, has not always been 'intersectional', as methodologically and conceptually murky such a framework can be (see Jennifer Nash, *Black Feminism Reimagined: After Intersectionality* (Duke University Press, 2019)). I mention trans theory here for its relation to current interventions in queer theory, but primarily to signal that my use of 'cisheteronormativity' is to mark 'queer theory' as an enquiry into sex(uality) *and* gender. For a fresh and compelling example within trans studies and Black studies, which I view as part of a radically transmuted queer theory, see Marquis Bey, *Black Trans Feminism* (Duke University Press, 2022).

[13] I am mindful of the universalizing tendencies of queer theory, something Judith Butler warned us about in *Gender Trouble*, p. 5, and something that continues to be discussed in quare theory and trans* studies; see E. Patrick Johnson, '"Quare" Studies, or (Almost) Everything I Know About Queer Studies I Learned from My Grandmother', *Text and Performance Quarterly*, 21.1 (2001), pp. 1–25; Gayle Murchison, 'Let's Flip It! Quare Emancipations: Black Queer Traditions, Afrofu-turism, Janelle Monáe to Labelle', *Women & Music*, 22 (2018), pp. 79–90; Cáel M. Keegan, 'Against Queer Theory', *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, 7.3 (2020), pp. 349–53; and Cáel M. Keegan,

My focus on non-musicological queer literature is not for a lack of queer musico-logical work,[14] but more so for my own sufficiently undisciplined mode of thought alongside methodological camaraderie with queer theories and debates that are dis-tinctly found outside of queer musicology.[15] I write not as an expert on (musical) sound who is to explain (to whom?) the queerness of sounds, but as a social and cultural theorist who concerns themselves with sonic and musical matters and their queer potentialities. To be clear, I am less concerned with asking what a reified 'queer theory' can tell us about a reified 'music', or with what may be statically 'queer' about certain sounds, than I am with *how* music, as just one component of drag performance, mutually mediates (and, hopefully, illuminates) queerness. How do music's social mediations, in this case, help us imagine a queer horizon? Or, when and where through sound and its relations is a queer utopian horizon illuminated and made possible?

This article is structured as a rhetorical triptych: theory–practice–abstraction. The first section establishes the methodological and theoretical foundations of the 'socio-cultural semiotics' of music – which is understood primarily through a reading and expansion of Georgina Born's planes of music's social mediation[16] – in relation to Deleuzoguattarian[17] semiotics, where 'meaning' is 'an interface between at least two force fields' wherein 'a thing has as many meanings as there are forces capable

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'Getting Disciplined: What's Trans About Queer Studies Now?' *Journal of Homosexuality*, 67.3 (2020b), pp. 384–97. Following Keegan, I continue to use queer theory with the knowledge that it operates 'against' – in close contact with – these other systems of oppression. With my relational understanding of queer I am trying to avoid what Elías Krell has termed the 'fetishization of radicality' in queer theory such that the interlocking issues of class, race, disability, and so on are not sidelined. Hence, I draw primarily on queer of colour theorists such as Ahmed and Muñoz in order to develop my notion of dragging, a framework I believe works for oftentimes messy and intersectional cases. See Elías Krell, 'The New "Queer" and the Old Racism', *Women and Music: A Journal of Gender and Culture*, 22 (2018), pp. 63–71.

[14] See *The Oxford Handbook of Music and Queerness* (Oxford University Press, 2018), ed. by Fred Everett Maus and Sheila Whiteley; Judith A. Peraino, *Listening to the Sirens: Musical Technologies of Queer Identity from Homer to Hedwig* (University of California Press, 2006); Krell, 'The New "Queer" and the Old Racism'; Dana Baitz, 'Toward a Trans* Method in Musicology', in *The Oxford Handbook of Music and Queerness* (accessed 19 January 2021 via Bodleian Libraries, www.oxfordhandbooks.com).

[15] For contemporary critiques of queer theory, see Talia Bettcher, 'Feminist Perspectives on Trans Issues', in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. by Edward N. Zalta (2020), sec. 5.3; Keegan, 'Against Queer Theory'; Jay Prosser, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* (Columbia University Press, 1998); Krell, 'The New "Queer" and the Old Racism'.

[16] Born, 'On Musical Mediation'; Georgina Born and Andrew Barry, 'Music, Mediation Theories and Actor-Network Theory', *Contemporary Music Review*, 37.5–6 (2018), pp. 443–87. Mediation theory, with an antonymous relation to 'immediacy', is anthropological and sociological in its aims and methods, focusing on microsocial interactions and (particularly in Born's thought) macrosocial power relations. This metaphysics sustains Born's insistence on music's plural and distributed ontology. For alternative, though primarily microsocial, studies of mediation in music, see Tia DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), and Antoine Hennion, *The Passion for Music: A Sociology of Mediation*, trans. by Margaret Rigaud and Peter Collier (Ashgate, 2015).

[17] It is long acknowledged (and often derided) that Deleuze and Guattari begin the second volume of *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987), thus: 'The two of us wrote *Anti-Oedipus* together. Since each of us was several, there was already quite a crowd.' In acknowledging the authors as a co-functioning multiplicity, I elide their names.

of seizing it'.[18] The subsequent section proceeds to infuse Bornian and Deleuzian understandings of 'music' and semiotics with recent queer theories of temporality. Pursuing a thick description of a drag performance, the central portion of the paper attends to the intricacies of music's social mediations during such events, pressing against the limits of these planes of mediation when considering queerness. Rather than ending with an overdetermined attachment of theory to practice, the paper concludes with a non-dualistic, generative synthesization of abstract and empirical modalities: 'dragging' emerges as both a methodology towards understanding how queer meanings – with their temporal and spatial imports – come into being and a mode of thinking and writing about the imports of music's social mediation. That is, the abstract and the empirical drag one another, such that this analysis and its conceptual speculation is born out of a dynamic oscillation between action and abstraction.[19]

As a methodology, it will become clear, dragging can pertain to many musical and sonic situations despite finding its metaphysical–empirical off-shooting from socio-cultural semiotics and queer theory. Drag performance offers us an opening to thinking about how drag drags sounds and other actors, as well as a rich case of such mediations, all the while specifically pertaining to issues of gender and sexuality and their elective affinities with, and complications of, music.

Music, Semiotics, and Assemblage Theory

There are, as ever, competing theories and applications of semiotics in music studies.[20] Rather than devote time and space to criticizing neo-formalist semioticians, whose work frustratingly reduces musical meaning to 'the music itself', this section pursues a positive articulation of the semiotics I find conceptually resonant with queer theory.[21]

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[18] Brian Massumi, *A User's Guide to Capitalism and Schizophrenia: Deviations from Deleuze and Guattari* (MIT Press, 1992), p. 15, p. 10.

[19] On the 'oscillation' between the empirical and the critical, with an emphasis on conceptual effects of the empirical, see the 'Introduction' and 'Postlude' to Georgina Born's most recent collected volume *Music and Digital Media: A Planetary Anthropology* (UCL Press, 2022). See also the 'Preface' to Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2014).

[20] For an expanded account of semiotics in music, see Giles Hooper, 'A Sign of the Times: Semiotics in Anglo-American Musicology', *Twentieth-Century Music*, 9.1–2 (2012), pp. 161–76. Outside of music, the patriarchs of semiotics and semiology are Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce. The latter had a great influence on Deleuze and Guattari, since Peirce's sign systems are in a triangular relationship between objects, representamen (iterations), and interpretants (receptions). His idea of 'semiosis' contends that this triangle is a dynamic process, allowing meaning to change, and has notably been brought into music studies by Jean-Jacques Nattiez among others. Peirce also theorized the interaction of 'introversive' and 'extroversive' semiosis where meaning is developed both inside and outside the sign itself, a parallelism whose trace permeates my socio-cultural semiotics. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. by Roy Harris (Open Court, 1986); on Peirce, see Jean-Jacques Nattiez, *Music and Discourse: Toward a Semiology of Music*, trans. by Carolyn Abbate (Princeton University Press, 1990).

[21] For neo-formalist approaches, see Kofi Agawu, *Music as Discourse: Semiotic Adventures in Romantic Music* (Oxford University Press, 2009); Robert S. Hatten, *A Theory of Virtual Agency for Western Art Music* (Indiana University Press, 2018); Allan F. Moore, *Song Means: Analysing and Interpreting Recorded Popular Song* (Ashgate, 2012); Philip Tagg, 'Analyzing Popular Music: Theory, Method, Practice', *Popular Music*, 2 (1982), pp. 37–67; Raymond Monelle, *Linguistics and Semiotics in Music* (Harwood Academic Publishers, 1992).

This alternative lineage of music semiotics, one that draws on Deleuze, thus lays the necessary foundations needed for my notion of dragging.

Though I do not wish to dwell on formalist semiotics, it would be condescending to pretend that such scholars do not engage with conceptions of meaning which escape structural analysis. For instance, Raymond Monelle's *Linguistics and Semiotics in Music* (1992), a predominantly formalist (text-centred) book, flirts with the idea that 'post-structural' semiotics is important for investigations into 'the untidy, the irrelevant, and the marginal'.[22] I wish to take up Monelle's speculation, particularly thinking about musical meaning (or any cultural meaning) as immanently 'untidy', or 'messy'. I believe any attempt to tidy up the messiness of musical meaning through meta-structural models or reductive social determinism is nothing less than a compression of the radical potentialities of music's contested meanings.[23]

Monelle's admission that poststructuralism is important for us to think about 'messiness' prompts my shift here to Deleuzoguattarian thought. Though they have received little positive attention in music studies, I believe Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's scattered concepts can be productively mobilized towards a queering of music semiotics.[24] Emblematic of Deleuze and Guattari's understanding of philosophical method and theory in *What Is Philosophy?* (1994) is the contention that philosophy concerns above all the creation of concepts, concepts that speculatively enable us to glue different kinds of experience together and ultimately think differently about them.[25] A second characterization of Deleuze's (single-authored) philosophy is that it is a philosophy of difference as opposed to identity and sameness insofar as, for Deleuze, one of the key errors in Western philosophy has been the emphasis on the same, the ordered, and the patterned.[26] This together constitutes Deleuze's critique of

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[22] Monelle, *Linguistics and Semiotics in Music*, p. 322, esp. 'Deconstruction and Allegory'. 'Post-structural' is used in a periodizing sense, meaning continental European philosophy which engaged in a self-critical assessment of post-war 'structuralism', which is concerned with oppositions and determinations within larger social structures. With all caveats regarding simplification aside, structuralist semiotics understands 'texts' as reducible to their 'contexts' (the structures which they homologically *reflect*). I do not use 'post-structuralism' to connote a radical break with structuralism, but rather to point to continental philosophy since the 1960s, when it began to question the epistemological presuppositions within structural analysis' reduction of objects to their social contexts. Monelle's is a complex engagement with such a period of contemporary European philosophy deserving its own analysis, but he is mentioned by name here as a productive pivot from formalistic and structural semiotics towards an approach which accounts for *complexity*.

[23] See Susan Sontag, 'Against Interpretation', in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (Penguin, 1966). For a classic example of social determinism, see Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. by Karen E. Fields (Free Press, 1995).

[24] There are obvious exceptions to this ostracism. For example, Ian Buchanan and Marcel Swiboda, *Deleuze and Music* (Edinburgh University Press, 2004); Klaas Coulembier, 'Multi-Temporality: An Analytical Approach to Contemporary Music, Embracing Concepts of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari', *Music Analysis*, 35.3 (2016), pp. 341–72.

[25] Cf. McKenzie Wark, 'Designs for a New World', *e-flux*, p. 58 (2014), <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/58/61163/designs-for-a-new-world/>; Edward Campbell, *Music after Deleuze* (Bloomsbury, 2013).

[26] Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, p. 171. See also Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, trans. by Hugh Tomlinson (Columbia University Press, 1985).

'the Image of Thought' (common sense) in (Anglo-American analytic) philosophy, a critique similarly foundational to queer theoretical commitments, since it has long been contended by queer theorists – in my reading of their methods and concerns – that 'ordinary language philosophy' is only equipped to sustain the status quo, and that to begin to critically queer our current world and the world of the future we have to be transformed by the poetic and the affective (forces derided as 'illogical', for instance, by 'common sense' positivists).[27]

Since the scope of this article cannot boast an extensive account of how Deleuzo-guattarian philosophy can influence musical semiotics (and indeed queer musical semiotics), I will instead focus on particular concepts and draw from some recent attempts to relate them to music studies.[28] Deleuze and Guattari built a cornucopia of concepts in their respective and joint careers, the most well known of their ideas being the Body without Organs, the rhizome, de/reterritorialization, assemblages, *ritournelle*, and the smooth and striated. Most apposite to my understanding of dragging is the notion of assemblages, which has been influential in the thinking of a variety of music theorists, historians, and anthropologists, and contains within it a combination of the aforementioned concepts.[29]

The assemblage provides useful grounding for the attempts to tap into fluid and fleeting relations. It has been latently influential in musico-theoretical attempts to unpick relations and their meaningful imports, ranging from Ivanka Stoïanova's idea of 'the musical utterance'[30] to Amy Cimini's 'musical Spinoza' and the affective interactions of music, as a sounding body, capable of affecting and being affected.[31]

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[27] See José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York University Press, 2009).

[28] For a comprehensive account of Deleuze and Guattari's ideas in relation to music, see Campbell, *Music after Deleuze*. Unfortunately, however, Campbell's application of these ideas is limited in scope to pitch relations.

[29] For a discussion of the metaphysics of rhizomatic and arborescent assemblages, see Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, pp. 587–89. For brevity, one can think of the arborescent as a tree-like structure, the development of which we may speak of in terms of roots, germination, branches, and a single core (the trunk), and therefore as encapsulating notions of organicism. The rhizome, on the other hand, is a non-hierarchical, non-determined, non-teleological, co-functioning multiplicity. Arborescent-rhizome is not yet another binarism or duality, since Deleuzoguattarian thought has it that both forms exist simultaneously and interact, though the distinctions of absolute and relative are harder to determine.

[30] Ivanka Stoïanova's *Geste – texte – musique* (1978) is an early text, notably outside the Anglo-American academy, that brought ideas such as 'assemblage' to musical ontology. The musical utterance (*l'énoncé musical*) 'reject[s] fixed objects, historic formal schemes, architectural structures, conventional narrative and teleology in favour of process, play, experimentation, multiplicity, multi-directionality, plurivalence, discontinuity, [and] heterogeneity'. This ontology can be seen as an emphasis on 'becoming', wherein musical objects and their meanings are in flux (within the assemblage) with no closure. See Ivanka Stoïanova, *Geste – texte – musique* (Union Générale D'éditions, 1978), 11; cited translation in Campbell, *Music after Deleuze*, p. 42.

[31] By thinking about 'listeners, performers, instruments, spaces' and so on as 'bodies […] capable of affecting and being affected by one another, in such a way that analysis of the musical work becomes the task of unpicking the relations of the respective bodies which have reached a […] composite state', Cimini makes a case for detailed, non-reductive analyses that not only look to the musical 'text' and its so-called 'context', but also take the two as they are mutually affected by non-(con)textual forces. See

The assemblage undergirds my own argument of dragging as the conceptualization of (sonic, musical, corporeal, social, and so on) forces interacting within an emergent composite state. Deleuze, to be clear, writes that an assemblage is a 'multiplicity which is made up of heterogeneous terms and which establishes liaisons, relations between them' wherein 'the assemblage's only unity is that of co-functioning'.[32] Any *interaction and constitution of bodies* (human and non-human) – for example, a concert hall, a production line, a zoom meeting, a score, a gaming console – can be understood as an assemblage.[33] *Affect* brings us to new modes of feeling and knowing which are accessible when we open up to as many ways of being affected and affecting as possible. The affective assemblage thus helps us move away from dominant semiotic frameworks – 'which all seek some kind of hidden depth' in reducing meanings to social structure – towards seeking to understand 'connections and interrelations' that lie between 'a text and its outside', enabling a mapping of the significance of rhizomatic (non-hierarchical) ontologies.[34]

One of the most productive and novel developments of the assemblage as such comes from Born, who has proposed that music has no essence, 'but a plural and distributed material being', and that we ought therefore to think of music as 'an aggregation of sonic, social, discursive, visual, technological, corporeal, and temporal mediations: as a musical assemblage, where this is defined as a characteristic constellation of such heterogeneous mediations'.[35] In response to this plural and distributed ontology of music, Born develops the four planes of music's social mediation, a methodology that allows for examination of multiple, cross-scalar forms of mediation.[36]

Amy Cimini, 'Gilles Deleuze and the Musical Spinoza', in *Sounding the Virtual*, ed. by Brian Hulse and Nick Nesbitt (Ashgate, 2010), pp. 129–44 (p. 137). For an expanded account of affect theories, see Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (eds.), *The Affect Theory Reader* (Duke University Press, 2010); Marie Thompson and Ian Biddle (eds.), *Sound, Music, Affect: Theorizing Sonic Experience* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2013).

[32] Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, *Dialogues* (Athlone, 1987), p. 69; cited in Born, 'Music and the Social', pp. 267–68.

[33] Assemblages can be rhizomatic, without linear hierarchy and stratification, but they can also be arborescent, highly structured, and formalized. A centralized government is descriptively an arborescent assemblage, for instance. Such an example is necessarily simplified and does not capture the complexity of social stratifications. An 'either/or' analysis of assemblages types, that is, fails to account for the complex interactions of assemblages with others: within a highly centralized system lies also rhizomatic constituents that are contained and absorbed into larger and more powerful assemblages, where power is an exercised relation. (See also Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault* [Continuum, 2006], p. 59.) The conceptual force of the assemblage is in part its attempt to allow for such complexities to coexist. When we are able to analyse coexisting, yet seemingly contradictory, forces, it becomes possible to diagrammatically and selectively draw out and assert aspects of multiplicities we can determine productive (i.e., emancipatory) and purge those we can determine conservative (i.e., oppressive).

[34] Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Indiana University Press, 1994), p. 198; Emmanuel DeLanda, *A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity* (Continuum, 2006).

[35] Born, 'On Musical Mediation', pp. 138–39; Georgina Born, 'On Nonhuman Sound: Sound as Relation', in *Sound Objects*, ed. by James A. Steintrager and Rey Chow (Duke University Press, 2019), pp. 185–207 (p. 196).

[36] Born, 'Music and the Social'.

Born's planes (performance socialities, musically imagined communities, social identities, and institutions) allow us to attempt rich analyses of musical assemblages. This method, as a kind of social semiotics, is 'non-determined' in the sense that there is no fixed or desired outcome for the analyst: when assembling the assemblage, the analyst of musical planes is not ascribing meaning nor are they deciphering it in relation to a predetermined understanding of 'the social'[37] or 'the music'. Moreover, this method allows us to tap into the immanent socialities of creative musical practices without limiting ourselves to either the micro-social planes of, say, performance socialities (including 'the music itself') or a grand narrative, meta-framework interpretation: we can look at both and more.[38]

In light of the untidiness of meaning, I have attempted to elucidate the core Deleuzian ideas of assemblage and affect and how they have been related to music through mediation.[39] These interlacing ideations provide a conceptual and methodological framework through which we can begin to open up the possibilities of musical meaning beyond those that are made available in existing meta-theoretical attempts to codify and interpret meaning. Building on the incorporation of Deleuze into musical semiotics, then, my novel contribution to this exegetical dialogue is made through both lived queer experience as well as queer epistemological frameworks. Drag lip-sync is a phenomenon that alters, momentarily, the meanings of sounds and their constituent forces – dragging attempts to conceptualize the moments when a being, a bodily component of a given composite state, is dragged through the assemblage and brought out of its prescribed time and place. In our current global assemblage, that is, queer, trans, and of colour meanings remain suppressed. Dragging asks what happens politically and poetically when such alien and alienated meanings are repositioned to the fore of the assemblage, and in particular asks how music offers and is offered such potentialities.

Queer Theory, Temporality, and Drag

In order to orientate assembled and mediated semiotics towards queering musical meaning as part of a drag lip-sync performance, substantial space must be given to queer theory.[40] There are at least two functions of its inclusion: first, 'queer', with

[37] Cf. Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (Oxford University Press, 2005).

[38] See also Eric Drott, 'Musical Contention and Contentious Music; or, the Drums of Occupy Wall Street', *Contemporary Music Review*, 37.5–6 (2018), pp. 626–45 (p. 631). Drawing on Born's model of mediation and ontology, alongside assemblage theory, Drott ultimately makes the point that music's participation in activism exhibits 'polyvalence', a situation he similarly argues calls for us to understand musical 'meaning' in terms of the co-constitution of music and its external actors.

[39] On mediation, see also Amy Cimini, 'Music Theory, Feminism, the Body: Mediation's Plural Work', *Contemporary Music Review*, 37.5–6 (2018), pp. 666–93.

[40] See Teresa de Lauretis, 'Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities. An Introduction', *Differences*, 3.2 (1991), pp. iii–xviii. For a comprehensive and critical overview of queer studies more broadly, see Nikki Sullivan, *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory* (New York University Press, 2003).

etymological relations to the Indo-European word 'twist',[41] is an important mode of sensing and feeling in our desire for an emancipatory world,[42] used to express the lived experiences of gender and sexual minorities whose existence deviates from (cis)hetero-sexual paths;[43] second, 'queer theory', as an epistemological frame, has profound links to decentred notions such as 'assemblage', 'affect', and 'mediation', since from its inception queer theory has always challenged essentialist and rationalist philosophies.[44] The queer theoretical affinity with poststructuralism explored in this section – which is both historical, in the American academy, and conceptual – helps us relate the preceding, seemingly abstract and disembodied concepts to the embodied and discursive politics of gender and sexuality and how these mediate musical meanings. To borrow an untimely distinction from anthropology, 'queer' serves as both an 'emic' mode of being (ontology) in LGBTQ+ existence and an 'etic' analytic (method) – that is, it acts from the inside (emic) and the outside (etic).[45] Importantly, the emic and the etic are inseparable and indeed reciprocally mediate how queer life and queer theory can be done.[46]

Though there have been valuable contributions towards queering music studies,[47] a discipline that has long avoided issues of the body and pleasure so pertinent to queer

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[41] See Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, p. 67; Fabio Cleto, 'Introduction: Queering the Camp', in *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: A Reader*, ed. by Fabio Cleto (University of Michigan Press, 2002), pp. 1–43 (p. 13). Note the spatial origins of 'queer', with the relation to 'twist'. Ahmed has discussed how the spatialization of queer ('twist') matters for the orientations that are crucial to the sexualization of bodies, where queer denotes a 'twisted sexuality that does not follow a "straight line"'. Though I admire Ahmed's work, it will become clear how I seek to push this spatialization further via a consideration of the temporalities of queerness.

[42] Laboria Cuboniks, *The Xenofeminist Manifesto: A Politics for Alienation* (Verso, 2018); see also Marquis Bey, *Black Trans Feminism.*

[43] Following philosopher Paul B. Preciado, who takes their cue from Monique Wittig, 'heterosexuality' is not a sexual practice or a sexual identity but 'a political regime that reduces the sum total of the living human body and its psychic energy to its reproductive potential, a position of discursive and intuitional power'. See Paul B. Preciado, *Can the Monster Speak? Report to an Academy of Psychoanalysts*, trans. by Frank Wynne (Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2021), p. 52.

[44] Annamarie Jagose, *Queer Theory: An Introduction* (Melbourne University Press, 1996).

[45] Thomas N. Headland, Kenneth L. Pike, and Marvin Harris, *Emics and Etics: The Insider/Outsider Debate* (Sage, 1990).

[46] See Georgina Born, 'The Social and the Aesthetic: For a Post-Bourdieuian Theory of Cultural Production', *Cultural Sociology*, 4.2 (2010), pp. 171–208; also see Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *Cannibal Metaphysics: For a Post-Structural Anthropology* (Univocal, 2014).

[47] Gregory Barz and William Cheng (eds.), *Queering the Field: Sounding Out Ethnomusicology* (Oxford University Press, 2020); Suzanne G. Cusick, 'On a Lesbian Relationship with Music: A Serious Effort Not to Think Straight', in *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology*, ed. by Philip Brett, Elizabeth Wood, and Gary C. Thomas, 2nd edn (Routledge, 2006 [1994]), pp. 67–84; Nadine Hubbs, *Rednecks, Queers, and Country Music* (University of California Press, 2014); Freya Jarman-Ivens, *Queer Voices: Technologies, Vocalities, and the Musical Flaw* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Freya Jarman, 'Watch My Lips: The Limits of Camp in Lip-Syncing Scenes', in *Music & Camp*, ed. by Christopher Moore and Philip Purvis (Wesleyan University Press, 2018), pp. 95–117; Tavia Nyong'o and Francesca Royster, '"Different Love?": Introducing the Trans/Queer Issue', *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, 25.4 (2013), pp. 411–14; Jodi Taylor, *Playing It Queer: Popular Music, Identity and Queer World-Making* (Peter Lang, 2012); Sheila Whiteley, *Sexing the Groove: Popular Music and Gender* (Routledge, 1997).

frameworks,[48] my understanding of queer theory comes directly from writers such as Sara Ahmed, Jack Halberstam, José Esteban Muñoz, and Elizabeth Freeman.[49]

For Ahmed, bodies are 'queered' and 'straightened' by their relational positioning in the spaces they experience and produce.[50] She writes about phenomenal 'lines', as in the 'straight lines' that we strive for: soberly walking in a straight line; having a straight, linear argument; straightening up. The streets that we walk along today are aggressively 'straight' in the sense that when our bodies navigate such cisheteronormative spaces they are affectively told what and how to do and be.[51] In her work, Ahmed makes clear that 'lines of use' are only straight by default because they are what has been made easy *over time*.[52] To deviate from the straight and narrow is to actively queer one's orientation and the objects to which one relates.

Freeman's work on 'queer temporality' carries on this idea of lines but on a wider historical scale. Queer temporality builds on feminist criticisms of reproduction-oriented temporality wherein the heterosexual life is determined by sexist expectations of women to reproduce: cisheteronormative life, which can be pursued by cisheterosexual and LGBTQ+ people alike, is defined by institutionally recognized moments such as engagement, marriage, children, and so on.[53] Queer temporality *snaps* the family line. It rejects the normalization of heteronormative temporality and finds lines of escape in fleeting, emergent fissures wherein the temporal dimensions of life are not prescribed or hierarchized. Halberstam's relation of this to subcultural theory, which made a case for queer youth cultures subverting heteronormative temporality, is one of the few queerings in music studies that has not fallen back on possessed and given identity as the sole arbiter of 'queerness'.[54] Rather, following Freeman, Halberstam presents alternative temporalities in queer kinship and drag king culture, where queering emerges as radical bodily critique.[55]

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[48] Suzanne G. Cusick, 'Feminist Theory, Music Theory, and the Mind/Body Problem', *Perspectives of New Music*, 32.1 (1994), pp. 8–27; Cimini, 'Music Theory, Feminism, the Body'.

[49] Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*; Sara Ahmed, *What's the Use: On the Uses of Use* (Duke University Press, 2019); Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*; Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Duke University Press, 2011); Jack Halberstam, *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender, and the End of Normal* (Beacon Press, 2012); José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (University of Minnesota Press, 1999); Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*; Freeman, *Time Binds*.

[50] Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*.

[51] See Gill Valentine, '(Re)Negotiating the "Heterosexual Street": Lesbian Productions of Space', in *BodySpace: Destabilizing Geographies of Gender and Sexuality*, ed. by Nancy Duncan (Routledge, 1996), pp. 145–54.

[52] Ahmed, *What's the Use?*, p. 21, pp. 208–09.

[53] Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (Women's Press, 1979).

[54] As an example of others that do not, see Jack Halberstam, 'What's That Smell? Queer Temporalities and Subcultural Lives', in *Queering the Popular Pitch*, ed. by Sheila Whiteley and Jennifer Rycenga (Routledge, 2006), pp. 3–26.

[55] To be clear, identities here are not mere quotidian lifestyle choices or neoliberal technologies of selfhood, but rather are affective relations between minds and bodies, theories, and practices, that is, there is room for cis and straight persons pursuing queer lines, though the import of these relations changes in light of the discursive power structures that govern bodies in differential terms. Normatively, queerness can, and must, be pursued by all, though descriptively what this looks like will differ in our present time of power imbalance. Halberstam's queer kinship is not just a 'choice' made by the drag kings in his study but is in fact a survival-based necessity – such a 'lifestyle' is made necessary by socio-cultural distinctions, differentials, and disempowerments. The subversion of heteronormativity here is not mere 'choice' but an emancipatory resistance. See note 44.

Contrary to much work on 'queer music', with the focus on identity, I wish to propose, following Muñoz, that 'queerness is not yet here […] We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality. We have never been queer.'[56] Whilst I acknowledge that many LGBTQ+ persons, including myself, consider themselves queer, I want to probe this conceptual 'not-yet-ness' of queer – the *pre*-normative apprehensions of queerness. The becoming-queer of queer futurity encapsulates notions of affectivity as forces clash and bodies are reconstituted in assemblages. I argue that affective mediation finds conceptual cama-raderie in queer thinking: queering *qua* a spatio-temporal mediation – of synchronic, diachronic, and non-chronic affect – thus fleetingly emerges from sites of liberating aggregation.

Taking queer temporality and the snapping (instead of merely twisting, since a twist keeps the branch in place rather than bringing it to the ground) of normative lines further, Freeman writes about 'temporal drag', stressing 'all of the associations that the word "drag" has with retrogression, delay, and the pull of the [possibly reluctant] past upon the present'.[57] Dragging is a common term for musicians, as it is what we are often accused of when we have not been looking at a conductor or listening to our ensemble partners for a while. Indeed, not just pulling the past upon the present, dragging always connotes a notion of being 'out of time' in music.

The anthropologist Tom Boellstorff has noted that critiques such as Freeman's actually consolidate the belief that time 'is' straight.[58] In order to reject the linear paradigm of straight time, Boellstorff raises the possibility of radical temporalities that 'displace (rather than just slow or reverse) straight time'.[59] 'Displacement' brings the temporal into collision with the spatial and gives a different nuance to the concept of 'drag'. 'Drag', not just a temporal term, evokes its more everyday spatial implications: dragging an object through space. In this sense, space and time both have the potential to be 'dragged'. By being 'out of time' and 'out of place', dragging is here imagined as a radical act of queer mediation that displaces and heterochronizes musical meaning.

Vander Von Odd's 'Creep': A Case of Dragging

In this analysis, I am attempting a thick description of the track 'Creep' by Radiohead as it is dragged during a lip-sync by the drag artist Vander Von Odd.[60] The track used in this performance is an acoustic cover of 'Creep' by Brian Justin Crum, originally

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[56]   Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, p. 1.
[57]   Elizabeth Freeman, 'Packing History, Count(er)ing Generations', *New Literary History*, 31 (2000), pp. 727–44 (p. 728); see also Elizabeth Grosz, *The Nick of Time: Politics, Evolution, and the Untimely* (Duke University Press, 2004).
[58]   Boellstorff, *A Coincidence of Desires*, p. 23.
[59]   Ibid., p. 24.
[60]   Vander Von Odd (she/they) is an established trans-femme drag performer of colour, having won season one of the Boulet Brothers' TV show *The Boulet Brothers' Dragula* (2016–present). *Dragula* prides itself on championing radical drag, punk drag, drag kings, and other alternative modes of drag performance that are marginalized in mainstream drag culture. This reputation is a mediation in itself that carries expectations for me as a viewer.

performed on *America's Got Talent*.[61] Whilst this analysis is not grounded in the situated knowledge of physical participant-observation, I still attempt to account for how I am a 'participant', 'observer', and discursive re-constructor of this event as I experience it digitally on YouTube.[62] Beyond participant-observation, and its limits, this analysis proceeds in an anthropological key by looking at the social lives of this track and its mediators as they move in actual and imagined time.

Before the singing voice is heard and Odd connects to and (re)synchronizes with it, the original track has undergone transformation, embarking on a 'social career'.[63] Though it would go beyond the scope of this paper to extend in full my methodological insistence on empirical detail and critical abstraction to Radiohead's or Crum's renditions and their respective planes of mediation, it is necessary to briefly discuss their 'respective worlds' in order to map what is being dragged in Odd's lip-sync. Crum's talent contest cover has taken 'Creep' from the alt rock sound world of early Radiohead to an acoustic arrangement: his performance, as recorded, seems to draw out more immediately the vulnerability of the lyric 'I' in this track. With the voice spatially centred in the recording, ironically edited to sound immediate, it is as though Crum's acoustic cover attempts to strip back to an apparently more 'authentic' expression of feeling Other. I also hear this vulnerability, however, in Thom Yorke's original recording, where the voice is made vulnerable by the overwhelming intensity of the electric guitar in the chorus.

Vulnerability, though present in each case, comes to have differing modalities and imports. With Radiohead, vulnerability lies as a virtuality, there to be affectively impressed, whilst with Crum vulnerability is a point of departure and a point of arrival, a flatly overdetermined interpretation of the original track's potential meanings. In only recorded terms, the track's potential is already being negotiated, and indeed vulnerability (daring to fail, to be exposed) emerges as a latency within 'Creep' that can be expanded and dragged out. The potentiality of vulnerability sounds out an immanent potential for queering, as the vulnerable may be configured in terms of (non-)masculinity. Of course, such vulnerability means different things for Yorke, Crum, and Odd, and to the latter of these I will now turn.[64]

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[61] Cover uploaded onto YouTube on 9 September, 2016: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v= WVf4U2g1E6M&feature=youtu.be>.

[62] Tom Boellstorff and others, *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds: A Handbook of Method* (Princeton University Press, 2012); Tom Boellstorff, 'For Whom the Ontology Turns: Theorizing the Digital Real', *Cultural Anthropology*, 57.4 (2016), pp. 387–407.

[63] On the social career of art objects, see Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Clarendon Press, 1998); for an astute and critical reading of Gell, see Georgina Born, 'Music: Ontology, Agency, Creativity', in *Distributed Objects: Meaning and Mattering after Alfred Gell*, ed. by Liana Chua and Mark Elliott (Berghahn, 2013), pp. 130–54 (p. 132).

[64] For an expanded and productive study of vulnerability, see Trevor Hoag, 'The Fragile Machine: Technology, Vulnerability, and the Rhetoric(s) of Addiction', *enculturation: a journal of rhetoric, writing and culture*, <https://www.enculturation.net/this_fragile_machine> (accessed 25 August 2024). In specific relation to masculinity, see Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (University of California Press, 1990), p. 21.

Figure 1 Screenshots of Vander Von Odd, performing 'Creep' at Sasha Velour's Nightgowns, 19 February 2018.

When I first press play, a crowd, whose heads I can glimpse in the periphery of the camera, cheers and whoops for Vander Von Odd.[65] Whilst Odd is eclipsed in darkness, synthetic strings emit siren-like sounds, as though a never-ending, microtonal porta-mento heralds danger; words in a monochrome circus font are projected behind the queen, such as 'creep', 'weirdo', 'pansy', 'loser', *maricón*, 'fairy', 'faggot', 'freak'.[66] The lights are cut as the strings dissipate at their apex. Delicate piano chords enter to break the silence. As Odd begins to turn her body to face the audience, a spotlight falls onto her.

She wears an all-black velvet dress that resembles a Dior silhouette from the 1940s, the front chest cut out to the abdomen, with an excessively large bow on her jet-black wig (Figure 1). She takes off her sunglasses to reveal her black eyeshadow matching her lips. On the line 'couldn't look you in the eyes', she snaps open her eyelids, allowing us to see her all-white eyeballs that counteract her blackened teeth. The crowd 'oohs' and 'wows' gently; some scream in affirmation. Odd continues to contort her lips and body in mesmerizing synchrony with the track. Her fingers, lengthened by her talon nails, wriggle with the shaking voice of the vocalist.

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[65] Performance uploaded onto YouTube on 21 February, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lOZnWILgjgE>.

[66] *Maricón* is particularly offensive in Latin American countries and is used as a derogative to denote 'gay man', namely one who 'takes' something in the sexual activo/pasivo binary – there is notable social stigma that follows being a 'pasivo' (as though this were emasculating). See Salvador Vidal-Ortiz, '"Maricón," "Pájaro," and "Loca": Cuban and Puerto Rican Linguistic Practices, and Sexual Minority Participation, in U.S. Santería', *Journal of Homosexuality*, 58.6–7 (2011), pp. 901–18 (p. 912). Odd's inclusion of it here highlights her identity as a queer person of Mexican heritage raised in Imperial Valley, California, which geographically neighbours Mexicali, Mexico.

As the chorus of the track lands, Odd begins to take off her right sleeve, commencing what could be considered a twisted cabaret. We being to see scars painted across her right bicep and chest. As she menacingly and poignantly tells us 'I don't belong here', she raises her right arm slowly, showing us her painful scars. They make out, 'LOVE ME'. As the track progresses, not a sound is heard from the audience. The second arm is revealed and we see the words 'FUCK ME'. Odd's gestures and expressions possess a troubling mixture of anger, poignance, and menace. As the chorus winds down, her body convulses as her eyes brood.

During the bridge, the voice of the singer has filled the room with screams of discontent, where the body of the singer has filled the room and become attached to the body of Odd, a divide between lip-syncer and voice is sutured by the haptic force of the speakers.[67] At the climax of the track, where the singer belts their longest note, Odd removes both her dress and her wig in one fell swoop. Everyone is screaming; I feel myself in a parasocial relationship with this audience, sharing their emotional responses.[68] She leaves her dress and wig dangling in her outstretched arms, leaving nothing but her bald head and body as they are upheld by her thigh-high boots. She drops her dress and wig to the floor. As the track draws to a close, Odd remains still, scraping her nails along her flesh and staring out to the audience. The spotlight turns off.

Odd's lip-sync performance of 'Creep', as mediated by my writing and experience through YouTube, is a complex aggregation of sounds, bodies, technologies, movements, and various pertinent actors. I am interested in how the multiple affordances of this track are in dialogue with, and possibly displaced by, social forces that agglomerate as an assemblage.[69] I locate in Odd's wickedly enchanting performance a *concrescence* of a queer potentiality immanent within and without 'Creep'.[70] That is, I hear a potential for queerness in 'Creep', both by Radiohead and in various covers, and this potential is actualized through Odd's drag. Dragging is here mobilized to demonstrate precisely the ways that such potential meanings travel throughout this assemblage and seize 'meaning', competing with one another to materialize certain affects.

As an audience, 'we' (in-person and online) relate to the performer (first plane) in ways that are non-hierarchical. The sonic forces come not just from a loudspeaker as

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[67]   Bird, 'Haptic Aurality'.

[68]   Donald Horton and Richard Wohl, 'Mass Communication and Para-Social Interaction: Observations on Intimacy at a Distance', *Psychiatry*, 19 (1956), pp. 215–29.

[69]   Eric Clarke, *Ways of Listening: An Ecological Approach to the Perception of Musical Meaning* (Oxford University Press, 2005).

[70]   *Concrescence* as I use it here comes from the process philosophy of A. N. Whitehead and denotes the subject's prehension of objects whereby 'the "potentiality" immanent in the object is "actualized" in the form of a real co-creative becoming concrete (*concrescence*)'. A. N. Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas* (Free Press, 1967); Paul Stenner, 'James and Whitehead: Assemblage and Systematization of a Deeply Empiricist Mosaic Philosophy', *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy*, III.1 (2011), pp. 101–30 (p. 106); both cited in Born, 'On Nonhuman Sound – Sound as Relation', p. 197. This is not to be confused with Gilbert Simondon's notion of concrescence to denote the 'growing unification of "the functional sub-systems" of the technical object': see Gilbert Simondon, *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects*, trans. by Ninian Mellamphy (University of Western Ontario; Aubier, Editions Montaigne, 1958), p. 31, cited in Born, *Music and Digital Media*.

channelled by a drag performer; the audience-participators also mediate how I and others may experience moments of this performance.[71] There is, to be clear, no singular conduit of affect, but rather there are multiplicities of conduits, all pulling and pushing one another towards certain speeds and intensities. For instance, when the audience screams, or when someone shouts the queer-of-colour-coded term 'yas', the performance extends beyond the stage spatially and in this moment temporally.[72] This performance sociality, therefore, contains mutual and multifarious drags. The performer drags our attention, taking us to a nonpulsed (unmeasured) temporality, but the audience also drags attention, bringing their voices and their socialities to bear on Odd's bodily multiplicity.[73]

This performance sociality therefore contains multitudes of media, of bodies that are sounding and resounding across, between, and beyond one another.[74] The socio-sonic 'thickness' of the event provides an expanded imagination of the performance ecology. There are competing actors, both human (Odd, the audience, and myself the YouTube viewer) and non-human (musical sounds and (para)linguistic features) – these all clash together, steering the temporal directionality of meanings. In other words, the meanings of the musical and linguistic features of 'Creep' are being redirected (spatially) towards, I argue, a queer imagination that escapes normatively produced lines (temporalities).

There are also multiple musically imagined communities (second plane) at work in this assemblage. The physical audience, and possibly most who watch on YouTube, are all likely fans of 'drag' and perhaps Odd herself. We are aggregated in our joint listenership, conceiving of ourselves as a physical and virtual community that shares an interest in the musical art of lip-sync.

This aggregation is complicated by the track 'Creep'. The track has its own social career insofar as it was written by Radiohead, has been acoustically covered by Crum, and is now in the realm of queer culture.[75] The recording we hear has already undergone a remarkable transformation from the electric guitar-laden version offered by Radiohead to the stripped-back cover; it is now dragged by Odd into a different socio-sonic space, one imbued with queerness. The same sounds (harmonies and

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[71] See Luis-Manuel Garcia, 'Feeling the Vibe: Sound, Vibration, and Affective Attunement in Electronic Dance Music Scenes', *Ethnomusicology Forum*, 29.1 (2020), pp. 21–39.

[72] 'Yas' is a historically queer of colour term, related in practice to the celebratory interjection 'yes!', which has been recently popularized by mainstream LGBTQ+ TV shows such as *RuPaul's Drag Race*. It is important to emphasize that this language has historical roots in Black, queer performance scenes, namely in 1980s US ballroom culture. See, for example, Jennie Livingston's documentary *Paris Is Burning* (1990). For critique of Livingston's white gaze, see bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Turnaround, 1992). On ballroom culture more broadly, and in relation to gender more specifically, see Marlon Bailey, *Butch Queens Up in Pumps: Gender, Performance, and Ballroom Culture in Detroit* (University of Michigan Press, 2013).

[73] Deleuze and Guattari borrow 'nonpulsed' temporality (Aeon), as opposed to stratified 'pulsed' time (Chronos), from Boulez. See Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 307; Edward Campbell, *Boulez, Music and Philosophy* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 231–33.

[74] My laptop, also, drags my attention as the medium through which I engage with these sounded bodies.

[75] See note 63.

melodies) are plugged into radically differing assemblages. When this recording is stripped from one performance sociality and dragged into the one under discussion – a process the late R. Murray Schafer called 'schizophonia' – it carries with it sonic spectres of one soundworld but is nonetheless infected and remediated as part of a new sound- and lifeworld.[76]

The track by Radiohead is not considered part of any 'queer musical canon', if such a stratification could be said to exist.[77] The musical communities are thus not determined by the track or vice versa. It is possible, however, that many who listen to this track locate within it the potentiality for queering. This certainly seems to be the case for Odd, I take it, given her dragging of the idea of 'Creep' (a 'creepy' person) towards queerness as an alienated and othered mode of being which longs for an escape from the here and now. Indeed, the way Odd drags 'Creep' demonstrates not only that the track is neither inherently 'straight' nor 'queer', but also that its meanings emerge at the site of performance.

The straight ear, as that organ which has been disciplined (straightened) to hear certain frequencies over others, may *over time* hear 'Creep' in normative, anodyne ways. The dominance of cisheteropatriarchal listening practices and interpretive formulae might lead a listener to hear only the cis and straight potential frequencies in 'Creep', whilst supressing the queer potentialities that I (and clearly Odd) locate within and without the track. Odd's case of dragging, contra the modes of listening enforced by cisheteropatriarchy, snaps the chronic temporality of cisheterosexuality, destratifying the ear with its queer frequencies such that it finds a new line of escape, warping the 'arrow of listening' in a queer direction. This snap is a snapping of time, where time is stratified temporalities, the ordering of moments and experiences. Once ordered, it becomes incredibly difficult to break these lines, as Ahmed has argued. Queerness does not simply twist these temporal and spatial lines, however, as Ahmed has it, but rather snaps them in a much more radical way. It breaks time and forges its own, entirely new timeline.

In terms of social identity (third plane), many members of this audience, including the public commenting on YouTube, establish themselves as queer (through verbal 'insider' gestures and comments, such as the aforementioned 'yas'), but there is no evidence to suggest that everyone attending considers their identity to be LGBTQ+. The medium through which I experienced the event, moreover, limits my knowledge of the racial, gendered, and classed identity of the audience.[78] What can be known, due

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[76] R. Murray Schafer, *The Tuning of the World* (Knopf, 1977), pp. 90–91; Steven Feld, 'From Schizophonia to Schismogenesis: On the Discourses and Practices of World Music and World Beat', in *Music Grooves*, ed. by Charles Keil and Steven Feld (University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp. 257–89 (pp. 258–60); Steven Feld, The Poetics and Politics of Pygmy Pop', in *Western Music and Its Others: Difference, Representation, and Appropriation in Music*, ed. by Georgina Born and David Hesmondhalgh (University of California Press), pp. 254–79 (p. 263).

[77] Lucas Hilderbrand, '"Luring Disco Dollies to a Life of Vice": Queer Pop Music's Moments', *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, 25.4 (2013), pp. 415–38; Micha E. Salkind, *Do You Remember House? Chicago's Queer of Color Undergrounds* (Oxford University Press, 2019).

[78] Of course, like queerness, these identities are not *always* 'observable' or 'audible'. I simply point this out to highlight an important limitation to this mode of research.

to her status in the drag community, is Odd's identity as a trans-femme performer of colour.[79] Not only is her naked body clashing forces with other bodies (sonic, corporeal, technological, and such), her body is also itself a processual topology that interacts, like all bodies, with matters of race, class, gender, and sexuality, which all come to matter within the assemblage.

Finally, as I am centring queer theoretical models, I take 'cisheteronormativity' to be an institutional (fourth) plane that operates within and without this dragged track. Though I am sensitive to the universalizing tendencies of macro-social and sometimes monological concepts like 'patriarchy' and 'cisheteronormativity', the geographical and socio-cultural context of this performance (UK–US) make it uncontroversial (empirically and discursively) to claim that cisheteronormativity institutionally governs many ways of thinking, and listening, at the time and place in which Odd is performing.[80] This plane 'operates' and 'governs' the insides and outsides of this track insofar it is what makes it easy, over time, to hear 'Creep' as straight and in straight ways. Cisheteronormativity is the line, or path, that has been well trodden; to deviate from these paths is hard, proximally (what is at reach and for whom), temporally (when is something at reach), and politically (what is it possible to reach).

Odd's dragging of 'Creep', a cultural labour that forges a new path for meaning through a transitive snap, is not a romanticized *resistance* to cisheteronormativity. There is no negation here, only positive escape. Queerness is not *anti*-straight or *anti*-cis. Cisness and straightness are anti-queer. In existing prior to and outside of all normativity, queer does not require cisheteronormativity to exist. Whilst cisheteronormativity relies on queerness, as its constitutive Outside, queerness is a purely positive illumination of a 'not-yet' futurity – where 'not' is an affirmation, a willing of a future return to pre-normativity in post-normativity – which escapes the temporalities offered by straight time. This positive understanding of queerness goes against many conventional and intuitive queer theories where 'queer' is always already in relation to normativity. I would rather we flip that formulation, suggesting that normativity is always already in relation to queerness. This relation is, counterintuitively, not mutual. It might be more productive for our desire for emancipation to understand normativity as the mode of being that has had to straighten itself up, de-queer itself.

This fourth plane, and the temporal meanings it permits, is dragged by Odd's performance: cisheteronormative soundings and meanings of 'Creep', in this cultural context, are displaced and heterochronized, taken out of space and out of time to the alien world of queerness. This escape to a new world of meaning might in fact be a

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[79] Odd is of Mexican heritage. The prefix *trans-* is left a prefix to emphasize the wide range of identities designated by the term, such as transsexual, transgender, non-binary, agender, and gender-fluid.

[80] For critique of conceptual universality, see Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 5; on intersectionality and the failures of monological analysis, see Kimberlé Crenshaw, 'Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color', *Stanford Law Review*, 43.6 (1991), pp. 1241–99; Muñoz, *Disidentifications*; Roderick A. Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (University of Minnesota Press, 2004); for critique of intersectionality, see Nash, *Black Feminism Reimagined*.

return to a prior meaning, the meaning that risks being erased over time. 'Creep''s potential for queerness, something that has always been there, is materialized, dragged positively into being. Though the fourth plane tries to drag it back, Odd's drag is more forceful, more intense, and thus wins.

The planes of music's social mediation, as they cohere into an assemblage, make clear precisely *when* and *where* dragging acts and *what* its significance is. The planes are not always equal in force, nor are they always complementary. As the planes drag one another, in competing speeds, intensities, and directions, there is no *contradiction*, only a messy and complex aggregation of creativities. It is not that the fourth plane has been negated or resisted: this performance assemblage, instead, proffers lines of escape, lines that *do not need cisheteronormativity to overcome.* Without cisheteronormativity, the queer potentialities of 'Creep' are laid bare, pointing towards a horizon imbued with radically queer ways of being and listening.

Queerness here, perhaps both relationally and non-relationally, is not defined negatively as 'not this or that'. It is a pre-normative being, thinking, listening, sounding, resounding, and so on – Odd's concrescence of queer meaning creates a fissure in space and time for us to jump into, escaping this present world.[81] In such an analysis, 'Creep' becomes imbued with the warm glow of queerness, subsuming the imagination that Odd partially assembles in this moment.

The queer potentialities of the track – potentialities that are immanent in all cultural objects – alongside the queerings attempted by the performer and her audiences momentarily coalesce, only to dissipate once the performance ends, leaving us with a residual impression of what is possible. The imaginations of meaning queerness offers are endlessly creative and aggressively political in their construction of radical alternatives. When queer performance presents new possibilities, lines of escaping the oppressions of here and now, we might start to imagine a then and there.

Dragging Music: A Queer Methodology

If my approach were to decode the intra-musical features of this track and this performance, relying on metaphor (concepts are not metaphorical) and/or formalism, how would I account for the complexity of the socio-cultural meanings in which music is always entangled? Likewise, if I presented a grand-narrativized interpretation of this track solely in terms of 'cisheteronormativity', I would simply be reducing the affective, mutually meaningful relationships between music and queerness as they operate in the material processes of this artistic phenomenon. It is only through the combination of the particular and the large-scale, the material and the critical, that we get closer to apprehending the potential meanings of queerness as they are dragged both out of and into music.

'Drag' *qua* analytic allows us to map when and where queer-material processes are emergent. Grounded in a Deleuzian and Bornian semiotics of music, where music's

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[81]   On relational and non-relational queer thinking, and how they can be thought together, see Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, pp. 10–11.

ontology is neither predetermined nor singular, drag makes conceptual space for apprehending the complexity of all musical experiences. When Odd reveals her naked, scarred, and painted body in relation to the strained high note of the track's climax, the screams of the audience appear neither as a response to the powerful vocals nor to the drag queen's body, but rather the two forces (and more) as they are dragging each other. This dragged displacement and heterochrony of sounds is so because it takes a being ('Creep') that can be heard as straight into the realm of the liminal body as constituted through drag, namely an alien body that queers our emergent understanding of this track's meanings and significance. 'Drag' therefore invokes fissures of queer potentiality as they emerge as though coming from 'out of time' and 'out of space'. Drag's connotation of reluctance, as beings are dragged away from certain lines, demonstrates Ahmed's notion of 'straight [meaning]' being made easy, since the ability to make audible the non-normative meanings of a thing takes considerable effort.

Dragging helps us imagine alternatives to what is offered by wider social forces such as cisheteronormativity. This performance is not defined by cisheteronormative power relations, but a fleeting escape from such power has bold poetic and political implications. When the body of Odd is broken and scarred by the desire to be 'loved' and 'fucked', the 'meanings' of 'Creep' – its linguistic connotations, its sonic affordances, its configurations of space, and so on – are intensely dragged into a time and place saturated by queer experience, the experience of being an alien body that fails to orientate itself in 'straight' or 'cis' ways. Such bodies exist out of cisheterosexual time and space. Dragging offers an explanation and enhancement of the queering of meaning, in which 'how' something comes to mean is understood as a coalescence of competing forces.

Dragging is an epistemological and methodological commitment to servicing and furthering subaltern politics, such that (multiply) marginalized identities find meaning to which they can relate and from which they can powerfully re-orientate their imagination of what is possible. I am sure its application can (and must) extend to other intersectional minoritarian positionalities, in a way that would take further the analysis of Odd's queer of colour performance presented here. This analytic fluidity suggests that dragging is relational, but it simultaneously makes space for dragging as something non-relational that mobilizes the 'not-yet-ness' of queer futures. This not-yet-ness evokes the emergence of meanings as they are becoming-queer through dragging, and maintains a 'yet' inasmuch as the track's meanings are both becoming-queer and unbecoming-queer as the pressures of cisheteronormativity are likewise trying to drag us into their own normative world.

This analysis of meaning as it is 'dragged' offers a new kind of semiotics that demonstrates how the 'pluri-potentialities' of musical meaning are selectively actualized.[82] It illustrates the temporal contingency of meaning, making clear that 'meaning' is not inherent to a text or determined by a context. Musical meanings are so easily

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[82]   Connolly, *A World of Becoming*; cited in Georgina Born, 'On Music and Politics: Henry Cow, Avant-Gardism and Its Discontentsm', in *Red Strains: Music and Communism Outside the Communist Bloc*, ed. by Robert Adlington (Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 55–66 (p. 64).

dragged because music is a 'sticky' object, an intensity that affectively assembles and is assembled by other bodies.

A queer intervention in semiotics, as Odd so beautifully makes possible, is important because it makes available alternative and, in fact, radical musical meanings that affirm subaltern peoples while displacing the colonizing forces of cisheteronormativity. Through refusing to focus either the music or its contexts, I have produced a socio-cultural semiotics that allows us to analyse complex multimedia artistic practices where music is important but not necessarily 'central'. Finally, I have taken the planes of music's social mediation to a new plateau by bringing 'queer' as an identity-imbued epistemology into the assemblage.

The theoretical world of Deleuze and Guattari, and their applications to music semiotics, made an opening for queer thinking that I have tried to stretch. The affective assemblage has clear resonances with the aims of queering: to destabilize normative and normalized modes of knowledge production. Methodologies, such as the one developed here, are not a way of standardizing and reproducing existing epistemologies but should conversely respond to our materials and in turn transvaluate our standard ways of thinking and listening. Through such means, and once we get past trying to determine what queer is, we can start adequately accounting for how queer potential is dragged into and out of meaning. Dragging has proven a powerful concept for thinking in new and productive ways about how music's plural and distributed meanings are constantly (un)becoming in this way. Drag is a preliminary answer to Deleuze's question in my epigraph: through dragging, a being takes another being into its world while preserving the other's own relations and world.