Savage intimacy, deviant safety: surveillance technology and club culture

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The contested safety of dance music

Music is, of course, a kind of media. It is listened & watched, recorded, broadcast and circulated. Many scholars of music have pointed out music’s importance in cultural studies and media studies. Music is an important media form to explore, if one is interested in how media can serve the interests of liberation, because music of its affective power, and its direct engagement with bodies and emotions as well as verbal and textual expression. Dance music is especially interesting to explore in relation to questions of liberation, because dance is a physically embodied social activity that cannot be separated from political discourse about bodies and culture. This means that moments of dancing to music are especially rich sites to explore how people use media to negotiate contested identities and assert themselves culturally.

In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries in particular, dance music has been particularly important to communities of people who face exclusion, exploitation and oppression in dominant society along class and race lines, but also sexuality and gender. Poor Black and brown communities including communities that express sexuality and gender beyond and outside those defined as ‘normal’ by dominant society, have been at the heart of dance music genres from jazz to rock-and-roll to house music (in the US and UK especially), but also baile funk (Brazil), dancehall (Jamaica), dembow (Dominican Republic), reggaeton (much of Latin America) kuduro (Angola/Portugal), and cumbia (in various parts of Latin America. An especially important aspect of dancing and dance music is the way that people in them define cultural norms of bodily...
engagement and interaction, and assert or even revel in their own expertise in their bodies’ movements. ¹

Many involved in dance music provide a kaleidoscopic array of testimony to dance music’s ability to make participants feel safe, alive, and at home. Scholars have provided accounts of dance music serving as a refuge and haven for participants across culture, region and era. Safety is also an ongoing conversation among participants and organizers of dance music events, one that I have organized and joined myself on many occasions as a Dj, participant, event organizer and a scholar of popular culture. This kind of safety is not an accident or an inevitable feature of all dance music spaces. It must be defined and asserted against a society that seeks to regulate or erase many aspects of identity that are celebrated in dance music.

At the same time safety is an ongoing concern on the part of the state that justifies regular intervention into nightlife. In recent years this has increasingly included new surveillance technologies and practices permeating nightlife spaces. Given the nature of the communities that most depend on dance music and that generate most of its energy, these technologies - and the definitions of safety that justify them-- can put people at risk of harm, and hinder the ability of dance music spaces to provide the kind of safety participants need to create liberatory experiences. Thus both the harms deriving from these interventions need to be carefully addressed, and there needs to be much closer attention to the definitions and needs of safety asserted by participants in these creative moment.

In this article, I examine safety on both sides, focusing especially on the technological interventions into dance music spaces in the name of safety, but providing historical context to

¹ As well, powerful and influential movements in dance music tend to emerge from particular moments where communities are able to center bodies and practices that subvert or contradict hegemonic notions of desirability and respectability

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reveal how ongoing social dynamics shape their effects. This critical analysis of how surveillance technologies as deployed in dance music spaces developed out of previous long-term ethnographic research on the how marginalized communities in Jamaica assert anticolonial identities through dancing in popular music. In this context I also use ethnographic research, including multisited participant observation and a series of conversations and interviews with people involved in dance music and club culture, primarily in New York. As someone who is myself involved in dance music, focusing especially on spaces that support marginalized communities (especially immigrants and LGBT communities) as well as underground music scenes that are not mainstream but not necessarily linked to a specific pre-existing community, I also draw on 22 years of experience and observation at various levels of dance music.

Alongside the testimony of interviewees and participants’ own words in music media, I provide some brief historical context. Historical context helps to articulate the contours of the kind of safety that truly centers and protects communities whose daily lives are unsafe as a result of ongoing structural inequality along lines of race, gender, sexuality and to some extent class.

**Dance music as a site of refuge for oppressed people**

“The night and the club … provide an essential and unique space to lose the minds one uses all week. To find small cracks and crevices to call home.” (J. S. Allen 2009, 314)

“Nightclubs are where we’ve long learned to unlearn hate, and learn to become and love our real selves. They’re our safe spaces; places where music and dancing and the joy of our collective togetherness unlocks our fears and extinguishes our lingering self-loathing.” (Walters 2016)
Dancing is a dialogue between music, which evokes history and context through sonic reference, one’s own body, and other people’s bodies. The knitting together of body-community-sound-spirit-history is especially vital for people whose bodies, histories and relationships are excluded from or negatively perceived by dominant society. Dance music provides essential community and identity-building resources. As Bernice Johnson Reagon put it: “The only way you know who you are sometimes has to do with what you can do when you go home from work, change clothes...and dance all night long.” This is especially true for people and communities that face social oppression on the basis of sexuality as well as race and gender. When you cannot be yourself at work, but also perhaps not at home (if your family does not respect your gender or sexual identity), and also not on the street (if your identity is not positively affirmed in public places or even puts you at risk), then it is even more important to find a place where you can be yourself.

Most dance music genres in the US, Europe and cosmopolitan cities worldwide (such as Rio or Capetown) originated first from communities of oppressed or excluded people (from disco and house music to reggae, hip-hop, dancehall, house music, and sounds like funk carioca, kuduro, dembow or gqom). While scholars of nightlife and many involved in it distinguish between “commercial” and “underground” dance music scenes –this division does not fully capture how social power maps (or doesn’t map) onto these pre-existing social divisions.

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2 Mann, JPMS
3 Bernice Johnson Reagon quoted in Allen 319
4 Interestingly, while dance music has a particular niche and vitality for transgender, queer, gay and lesbian people, women as a category do not have as central a force in it as producers, despite arguably being historically excluded and oppressed. This may have something to do with the material and social limits on the kinds of spaces that are available for dancing and on the technologies of production and circulation of music. That said, there is ample testimony to the way marginalized communities find dance music in the club important.
5 Anderson identifies five components by which one can identify a particular location or event as commercial vs. underground: “ethos, organization, identity markers, norms, and behaviors/activities” (see Anderson, 2009a, b; Draft. Do not cite without permission of the author.)
“Underground” does not map clearly onto social class, onto race or sexuality, although it is generally true that “underground” dance music tends to be associated more with communities who lack social power. For dance music that starts “underground” and eventually crosses over to more mainstream venues and platforms of circulation, it is usually the case that non-dominant race, sexuality, class and ethnicity are at the heart of the genre’s creation and fermentation on the dancefloor, and it to these communities that dance music is most important. “The club is the central institution of Black queer communion.” Allen’s use of “communion” and linkages between an experience of spiritual and physical support and regeneration is not isolated, and is borne up sonically as well in his (and many others’) discussion of the musical linkages between gospel and house music in particular. This value of communion and regeneration points to a broader social purpose for these particular kinds of dance music spaces, one that support the specific communities who bring these events about, but also providing liberatory significance for society at large. Not because non-Black, or non-queer people need to participate in or have access to Black queer communion, but because a society in which such a communion is possible, valued and safe is necessarily more liberated than one in which it is not.

When looking at the hostility from mainstream society to dance music scenes, it is specifically the same identities (and basis for inequality) that are invoked as dangerous: from fears of ‘deviant’ sexuality to ‘unruly’ or ‘uncivilized’ Black people, or the generally racialized fears of drug user and dealers and the presumed violence that accompanies them, dance music often sparks anxieties over social order.

Anderson 40 and Kavanaugh, 2007) - however all of those can also be explained by culture and social location.
Anderson 919
6 Allen p. 315

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As the current social order is organized along lines of colonial inequality, it is not surprising that the spaces and communities at the heart of dance music are not only the poor regions of wealthy nations, but also nodes in diasporic circulation. Dances are where poor people and their music, often from former colonies/subjects of wealthy nations, come together and forge new identities out of the pieces that they carry with them and piece of what they find around them. This does not mean that they are inherently revolutionary, but it does mean that they serve a social function that has the potential to challenge the dominant social order. Some of the most vital dance music scenes create spaces within them where people overturn dominant social norms and celebrates their opposite. In the context of a broader society that seeks to erase or reshape identity in the service of a hierarchical social order, having the chance to experience and define something different, even for a moment, is psychologically and socially healing. It is this that leads scholars like David Katz to call dancehall music a “site for the repair of cultural injuries.”

**Under the radar: conditions for safety and intimacy**

In order to have such experiences of repair, people need to have spaces in which they feel free to express themselves in ways that do not fit the dominant social order and to do so in communion with others. Communion is an intimate experience, but not a completely private one. In this case, intimacy evokes the vulnerability that people can share between each other, and that can be broken by the wrong kind of visibility or participation whereby that vulnerability can be exploited. Intimacy requires a relationship in which that vulnerability will be exploited, a relationship between people in which one can be safe. Dance music events that seek to create this

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Some call nightlife a safety valve that prevents unrest, but my and other research suggests that the question of the conditions under which it can be one or the other are worth investigating.

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kind of intimacy must find ways to structure how people enter the space and who feels comfortable in it, and focus especially on the vulnerabilities of people who the events most want to welcome.

It is only possible to subvert and transcend colonial social mores in practice when the people involved have a space within which they feel free to express themselves. There are many policies and practices that event organizers, Djs, attendees, and other staff or participants, can enact to facilitate this.

**Bad, dangerous and savage: reworking colonial values**

Some of this work is done on the level of musical creativity and the accompanying language and bodily performance that goes with it. For example many participants in underground dance music are aware of the hostility and the need for reclaiming values and terminology from dominant culture. From “savage” -a term used approvingly in drag and vogue dance scenes to describe a particularly effective and no-holds-barred performance, and “cunty” to describe a particularly femme aspect of drag performance, to the reuse of “gully” (a literal reference to an open sewer) in dancehall, or “ghetto” in house music and other dance music scenes, people reclaim the stigmatized terms of their own exclusion from dominant society. However, to do that requires a space in which one is protected and cannot be punished (socially or legally) as one might be out in mainstream society. What is generated in these moments of reclamation is a kind of intimacy – the ability to be vulnerable precisely along the lines that mainstream society has identified as attackable. That intimacy is what allows stigma to be reclaimed as a badge of pride – something only possible if one is a participant in that
vulnerability. Similarly, dance moves that are vilified as overly sexual, not respectable, in the context of the right kind of space, become assertions of power and control over one’s own body. But what makes such a space possible?

Dance music makers must also negotiate physical and legal contexts that shape who enters these events and how. In an apparent paradox, for many communities that generate and are (re)generated by dance music, safety often resides precisely in the spaces and practices that mainstream society identified as dangerous. Because dance music events tend to be loud, unless a venue is expensively soundproofed, it cannot host an event in areas where noise is heavily regulated. This immediately increases the likelihood that events serving nonelite people will be in a neighborhood that is poor, or industrial/nonresidential. Such locations are not necessarily unregulated legally, but regulations are less likely to be enforced. As well, some neighborhoods never or rarely call in noise complaints to the police for musical events, and thus are more likely to have dance music events in them that can escape detection. Some chief reasons for this are if loud music is culturally familiar and not read as threatening or because the arrival of police may be seen as more potentially disruptive. Both these dynamics contribute to a situation that maps onto a geography of social exclusion: dance music events serving marginalized people are more likely to be in neighborhoods where they live, and in spaces that are unsupervised or under the radar of the police and the regulatory state. This means the physical locations in which poor, Black, brown, immigrant, and queer people congregate to dance are seen by wider society as unsafe: “bad neighborhoods.”

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8 Importantly, such terms cannot be reclaimed by people who are not risking stigma, even the reclamation is an act of intimacy. A white European dance music event using the word “ghetto” does not have sufficient intimacy and vulnerability to the stigma to be able to reclaim it.
As well, the activities occurring at dance music events are also often viewed as unsafe by mainstream media and lawmakers, as well as others in positions of social and political power. This includes non-heterosexual sexual practices, certain kinds of dance moves, and the consumption of legal or illegal drugs (including alcohol) that many believe can facilitate aspects of intimacy.

Beyond this, mainstream media and state police identify not just the places and practices, but also the people who occupy them as intrinsically dangerous. The leap from ‘unsafe’ to ‘dangerous’ elides the question of for whom a place, practice or person is unsafe, and for whom it is to be kept safe. It is clear that in general the main occupants and residents of unsafe spaces are not understood to be those who need protection: instead the primary response in many places to identifying unsafety is to treat it as threatening to the rest of society and thus requiring policing and punitive control. Even the music itself that originates in these spaces, from disco to house music and techno to newer forms like bounce music or dancehall is described by many authorities as “unsafe” - such music, some argue, encourages moral degeneration, sexual license, drug use and violence. (Hill 2002; Hesmondhalgh 1997) When dance music (and to some extent the people who originate it) do cross over into mainstream media circulation, they are often accompanied by moral panics that stigmatize both the bodies and the spaces that help generate them. These moral panics lead to increased surveillance and discipline enacted on the people who generate these musical movements.

**Governments against dance music: dynamics of coloniality**

As occasions where people celebrate identities that can challenge the foundation of the dominant social order, we can see why so many governments intervene in dance music. One dynamic at play is the history of slavery and colonialism, wherein the cultural identities of the
poor and marginalized pose an existential threat to the status quo that depends on their social exclusion and exploitation. In some cases government intervention takes the form of bans on particular music associated with marginalized communities dancing, often spurred by moral panics among the elites and middle classes. So in Brazil, the state has repeatedly banned the music and the practitioners of Funk Carioca, a genre emanating from poor primarily Afro-Brazilians in the favelas. In Jamaica, the genre of “dancehall” is decried by some in public media platforms as “moral poison” and songs are regularly banned by state action in an dynamic has persisted since the 1930s, of a cultural and structural hostility to any of the Jamaican dance music genres associated with the poor. Concerns about deviant sexuality also track many of the moral panics, and often lent increased strength to legal regulation. These concerns are not wholly explained by the persistence of non-western and pre-colonial attitudes about bodies and sexuality reflected in dance music of marginalized people, since colonial states also had non-heterosexual practices and identities. Many queer theorists suggest that heteronormativity serves the dominant social order both within and outside of colonialism. At the same time, the dynamic of racial difference heightened the likelihood of such practices being read as dangerous.

The colonial metropoles as well, embody hostility to the music especially of Black residents, as well as immigrants from former colonies. In England, this social and legal hostility to dance music especially from Jamaicans and Jamaican-British people meant dance music initially flourished under the radar in illegal house parties and pirate radio broadcasts. As


10 British Broadcasting Commission generally did not see music from former colonies as furthering its cultural mission. As that music took hold in especially working class neighborhoods within England where Black immigrants tended to settle, it became popular also with some working-class white youth. However legal media platforms like BBC did not play it, and dance venues feared the clientele (in early years, Black patrons legally barred entrance). Even when BBC restrictions loosened and community radio expanded, dance music was
recently as 1994 the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act included an entire discussion of “raves:” dance events that brought together interracial and cross-class communities of British youth dancing to music originating from those same illegal sites. Notably the Act specifically focused on music styles that reflected the dance music tastes: "sounds wholly or predominantly characterised by the emission of a succession of repetitive beats." This targeting of a music style that is at once laughably vague but also clearly aimed at dance music popular at the time. In the US, moral panics around similar dance events led to many regulations and interventions in nightlife across the country in the 1990s, culminating in the 2003 RAVE Act - while the acronym shortened the phrase Reducing Americans’ Vulnerability to Ecstasy (a drug often associated with electronic dance music) the acronym spelled out RAVE, one name for the massive dance parties centered on electronic dance music. However, the hostility to music and dancing in combination has older roots - in New York and other states in the US, laws remain on the books that specifically mandate increased costs in the form of a “cabaret license” to any venue that serves alcohol and permits dancing - an imposition that leads to police shutting down venues if attendees become too physically expressive in respond to music playing on the sound system.

Surveillance technologies in the club

Bans and restrictions on dancing and dance music (alongside other cultural practices of marginalized communities) as hinted briefly above in fact a feature of the colonial and post-colonial era. However in recent years the state and the private entities it regulates are introducing

considered not community-oriented enough and remained on pirate radio, while the clientele and music genres only gained uneasy foothold in legal music venues and mainly stayed in squats, warehouses and outdoor parties called raves.
increasing numbers of surveillance technologies. At the same time, there is more discussion of the safety of participants at events, who, surveillance technologies are argued to also serve. While technologies from ID scanners to CCTV are introduced in the name of “safety,” the meaning of safety for the majority of people being watched is not often investigated in any detail. But we should expect, given the source of dance music, that safety might have a different meaning there, or require different interventions to be preserved.

In recent years, government intervention has been increasingly preventative, as well as punitive, or has combined both in order to bring a new kind of discipline and visibility to the dance floor. One recent example is that of the Fabric nightclub in London, a popular nightclub that was closed down due to a drug-related panic combined with pressures from a gentrifying real estate market. Fabric was shut down after an inspection actually raised no specific legal infractions. Following prolonged protest it was allowed to reopen if the venue installed of CCTV, ID scans, and other surveillance technology, in the name of ‘safety.’ (Bilefsky 2016)

Such moves are increasingly common in spaces and among communities that are seen as dangerous to the social order. While justified in the name of safety, this kind of safety –being included in a networked database of faces and biometric information- has never led to good outcomes for poor, Black, LGBTQ and immigrant communities.12

Interviews

I am preparing five interviews with different people involved in dance music. There are based in New York, one is in Los Angeles, and one is in Durham North Caroline. These people who are a combination of musicians, djs, dancers and club promoters reflect two or three

11 interestingly the distinction between beats and music with melody and harmony also reinforces a racialized distinction between western classical music traditions and primarily African music traditions in which complexity of rhythms is a central focus.
generations of queer and diasporic dance music culture in which the music and the people circulate transnationally, especially throughout the Caribbean and Latin America. Thus I expect their concerns to be useful lenses through which to push back against definitions of safety that originate in a colonial state.

*A note on methods*

While I had initially intended to center this work on participant-observation and thick description, the process of preparing this research inspired me to move away from that method, due to reasons discussed further below. Unfortunately, several recent events have prevented me from carrying out the interviews I had planned for the early spring. The one-year anniversary of the Pulse massacre (a shooting in a Latin@ gay bar in Orlando, Florida) generated a large number of events and commitments and also some exhaustion by many people involved in QTPOC-centric dance music scenes around discussion questions of safety. This was followed by Pride month in which many major cities are jam-packed with events and actions that occupied much of the energy of the communities I wished to engage with. Alongside that there were some other personal events for interviewees I had reached out to, so I was not able to conduct formal interviews before submitting this paper. The discussion here is preliminary: based on previous conversations and meetings, observations, as well as some analysis of previous scholarship.

As I prepared to delve into further research and articulate some long-standing ideas and themes coming out of my years of engagement with dance music, I have bracketed two important aspects of safety and danger – fire safety and safety from mass shootings – as beyond the purview of this article. As I write on nearly the 1-year anniversary of the Pulse massacre in Orlando, FL and not long removed in time from the Ghost Ship Fire in Oakland, CA (at which

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12 Browne
over 30 people died due to fire code violations at an illegal warehouse party), this omissions is somewhat troubling, even to me. However some aspects of fire safety and the role of fire codes, inspections and enforcement nightlife space can be addressed: some dynamics discussed below here do explain why people congregate in places that are not held to legal regulation. For reasons elaborated below, people may weigh the level of unsafety they feel in everyday life against lack of safety in one night in a club. As someone who has myself organized events in places that would dramatically fail fire safety inspections I am wrestling with the expectations I have developed around this question as well. However, the question of fire safety in buildings and when it is and isn’t enforced is not unique to nightlife but instead a feature of an unequal system of social infrastructure. The reasons why landlords do they not keep a space up to code, and why neither they nor the city believes they owe some tenants/renters of the space safety, are rooted in broader questions about class, race, regulation and power. The even more recent and dreadful fire in the Grenfell tower of public housing in England is also implicated in that broader discussion. In discussion fire safety in Oakland following the Ghost Ship fire, Jaime Omar Yassin points far beyond clubs and warehouses to other places of work and living that are also equally unsafe, and where people also die –poor neighborhoods where nightlife events often take place re often equally unsafe from a fire perspective and their landlords not held accountable either – and it is the landlords who ultimately are legally responsible and often have more power and resources to carry out that obligation, and beyond that the state. (Yassin 2017) As Yassin reminds us, further exploration here is necessary of the relationship between a dance music event and the neighborhood - are they located in those places for the same reason, and how should participants, neighborhoods and the state recognize their claims on the space? I set aside these
questions here, but see them as part of important work still to be done by scholars but more importantly by activists and community members.\textsuperscript{13}

An analysis of targeted mass shootings like the PULSE massacre is also beyond the scope of this work. While many articles responding to this event that clearly targeted queer/LGBT Latino people and have articulated the importance of nightlife as safe space (and thus support my thesis here), I have not drawn on many of them because it does not seem appropriate to make these pieces do work for my argument except to the extent it also addresses their concerns. My argument is similar in this respect: broader dynamics of racism, homophobia, as well as classism and sexism, explain much of the violence within and outside of these spaces. Thus the solution to them will not originate in these spaces, except for the extent to which they can provide affirmative experience of safety and intimacy for participants. Who is responsible for maintaining a baseline of physical safety in this context? Similar to fire safety (or, for example, clean water, breathable air), many would suggest at base this is a state function. However, many involved in these communities doubt the capacity of the state to function in this way (residents of Flint cannot be assured of clean water, of Oakland not of fire enforcement, Black people in many parts of the US cannot escape being shot by police, trans women of color cannot escape being murdered or attacked with no legal recourse available). That baseline physical safety is still something most people I spoke with considered a state responsibility.\textsuperscript{14} When it came to ensuring the cultural intimacy many communities require in the face of social hostility, it is less clear whether that can be reconciled with the definitions of safety recognized by the state. I hope after

\textsuperscript{13} In fact, the second meeting I participated in was organized by a nightlife venue in Bushwick, Brooklyn NY that seeks to address both the important role of nightlife for QTPOC and other marginalized communities and also the role of nightlife spaces in displacing the communities in which they sometimes pop up.

\textsuperscript{14} IN some cases this existed simultaneously with a recognition of what they saw as the state’s fundamental antiBlackness, anti-queerness and other negations of their selves and communities.
further interviews to at least articulate some limits of that question and lay out some methods by which participants can assert and defend their definitions of safety.

One interesting theme has recurred with each of these future interviewees before this article was broached was the tension between organizing and promoting an event that grows in size, popularity and notoriety, and having to deal with the pressures of increased visibility especially in the way that white attendees did not respect the people of color who were already there. This also came up in the group discussions more than once. Because access to such events and platforms is shaped by cultural and social norms and knowledges that structure the terms of engagement, when they are small, a person is less likely to know about these events unless they are already part of or in dialogue with the communities who are centered there. This meant that as people farther from these social scenes got interested in the events, a lack of safety arose from the increased presence of people who, at best, did not understand the social rules of engagement, and at worst came with an expectation that everyone not like them was there to be a source of entertainment and excitement. Increased press attention was also discussed with a similar ambivalence. In both cases participants and organizers valued the ability to set the terms by which people engaged with them. More than one person spoke about not wishing to be a “safari” or a “tourist experience” for white and otherwise privileged people. (Racher 2016)

These and similar concerns affected how I pursued my own research on questions of safety. Although initially I had planned to do more observation of events and thick description for the purposes of analysis and evidence, I found as I pursued this project that I did not wish to do “thick description” of events I attended. It is true that legal or Institutional Review Board-defined definitions of acceptable of safe observation might suggest that some of these events are public enough not to warrant consent forms from participants (and certainly active consent
would be difficult to get in that context). But this framing of safety did not fit my sense of the main concerns of participants, both in conversation and from my own analysis. This should not be surprising as the legal and cultural definitions of ‘safety’ enshrined in formal academic and scientific institutions have not been developed with much input from queer communities of color, immigrants or other groups at greater risk of exploitation or harm. (Kingston Mann 2014)

While I am a regular participant and even co-organizer of dance music events, and I make no secret of my connections to academia and my research interests, I had personal misgivings that prevented me from taking pen in hand as I attended them. Instead I have decided to do interviews with key organizers and participants in events that are representative of the dynamics I am interested in, and to summarize conversations I have had with participants on this issue, without naming all of them. Because this is primarily a project to challenge a dominant orthodoxy among policy makers and venues in which an agreed-on definition of safety is being relied on without investigation, my research here does not need to be comprehensive of all concerns and definitions of safety. Instead, the observations and discussions represent concerns and dynamics currently not accounted for among institutions of power.

Future Interviewees

- Interview with TY, a queer south Asian woman femme DJ and event organizer who does a regular dance music event in Brooklyn focused on queer afrolatin and caribbean audiences.
- Interview with ON, queer afrolatino man founder of “a Brooklyn-based monthly dance party and kiki celebrating queer male-identified people of color and our friends, fam, and allies,”
• Interview with HS, a queer and genderqueer white DJ, photographer, event organizer and venue manager who organized dance music events in Brooklyn not specifically aimed at queer audiences.

• Interview with IA, queer brown latina immigrant woman founder of a queer caribbean femme-oriented nightlife event.

• Interview with QP, a white queer working-class woman in the South who has dj’d and organized a dance music event.

Notes on discussions and observations so far

A foundational aspect of dance music is its ability to provide an emotional, cultural and physical refuge, a kind of safety, for people who do not have it elsewhere in their lives. What do these conversations (and later, interviews) reveal about how these communities define safety on their own terms? How might such understandings of safety allow them to subvert, push back against or redefine the technologies deployed against them? How can people continue to carve out spaces for liberatory cultural expression in a technologically networked and surveilled landscape?

Although these interviews have not yet been conducted, I was able participated in a series of meetings about defining and creating safety for people involved in nightlife. One was organized by me and another person, and two were organized by a local venue. I and others took notes (with permission of those attending). The following key points and concerns further challenge the definition of ‘safety’ that state and private institutions appear willing to invest in.

Many of these concerns were not visible in almost any policy work in relation to safety in nightlife, but spoke directly to the importance of cultural and social intimacy and the gendered and raced contours that shape how it is generated or destroyed:
Black and Brown people especially trans and genderqueer people repeatedly expressed concern about white cis people presuming a right of physical access to Black and Brown and trans bodies. Many described inappropriate touching of hair and bodies, including chest, breasts or buttocks, by “white gays” and “white women.”

As well, many described people making commentary on body parts and hair in ways that felt objectifying, and that made the dance floor and the club an unpleasant place for especially queer and trans people of color (QTPOC).

Some women (queer and straight) complained about objectification and disrespect by “white middle class gay men” in similar ways - touching and commentary that was unwelcome, while many queer people complained of sexual harassment and objectification by straight people.

In all the above cases, presence and participation in the dance was not itself sufficient to ascertain whether someone is contributing to or reducing intimacy. Instead the quality and method of presence and participation, and in some cases the specific vectors of power defined by what someone’s presence was (including race, gender, sexuality, class) and how that shaped their attitudes towards others in the space, was more determinative. In a recent article in music magazine The Fader, several identified one category of harmful people as “spectators.” London event organizer Kareem Reid stated “one of the aims of a safe space is to escape the gaze of spectators,” while Zezi Ifore, another London-based person who Djs and works in media makes the analogy: “Imagine if you let spectators into a gym, how would that fuck up the dynamics? Are you gonna feel comfortable or safe?”
Several participants pointed out that security guards sometimes were not aware of the complexities of identity, especially for transgender, gender fluid or genderqueer people whose gender might not appear to ‘match’ what their IDs said, or what was on the door of the bathroom they wished to use. AS well, they pointed out that technologies of security such as ID card scanners could end out ‘outing’ the carrier as transgender to the person scanning the card with no guarantee that they would be understanding or respectful.

Some described how the discretion exercised by security guards could be informed by racist, transphobic, homophobic, sexist or ableist norms in ways that made the space unwelcoming, or unavailable, or sometimes could expose a person’s gender identity, transgender status or medical situation to other partygoers or passersby. -- “I’ve met a few white security staff members who raise their eyebrows slightly when they hear about an R&B, hip-hop, grime, trap, or dancehall event, preparing for a long night ahead fretting over too many black people.”(Reid 2017)

Trans people feared transphobic harassment and violence, especially in bathrooms from cis people

Women of all races feared sexual harassment or violence from men

Many people felt police made them less safe due to the risk of racist or homophobic violence from them.

**The State as unsafety**

Many of the regulations and legal forces present in “legal” spaces do not actually function to protect community members from the risks they most often face: people of color face racialized violence and harassment from police and other state figures, queer and trans people face violence from homophobes on the street but also within and outside the police force,
women face sexual violence on the street, but even more so in intimate relationships and at a staggering rate from police. IDs used for limiting underage access to alcohol do little to address these harms, and the presence of security (“bouncers”) or police officers does not necessarily reduce the possibility sexist, racist, homophobic or transphobic violence since social roles of police and security (who are often ex-police) are historically and statistically complicit if not at the forefront of all of that.

As well, it is important to note in relation to gendered and sexual violence, that there is not a lot of evidence that police involvement makes women safer. This is especially true once one removes racialized dynamics and dynamics that place blame outside of social relationships: so white women may be able to invoke police to be protected from Black and brown men who they don’t know, as this is the most common trope of women’s unsafety in law enforcement and popular culture. However Black and brown women may not find such protection. AS well, queer and trans women (even more so when not white) may not. As well, most research suggests that women, even in nightclubs, are more in danger from men (of whatever race) that they do know, at least socially, and that harm is one that is extremely rarely prosecuted and even less likely to be won in court. The unsafeness of the location (or the presence of alcohol or drugs) has been argued in such cases to reduce attacker’s responsibility and to reflect poorly on the woman who is in the space: “what was she doing in such a place?” “why did she drink with him/be where drinking was going on?” are common ways to shift responsibility away from perpetrators of sexual violence against women.

Alongside the stark reality of violence perpetrated by state actors against Black and brown youth and against many women (especially trans women of color), the state also does not
pursue violence from nonstate actors, especially homophobic, transphobic and gendered violence by men.

These concerns are also shaped by the geographic context that shapes where dance music events occur. As discussed above, because access to sites of cultural expression - from dancehall to radio waves, are shaped by law, licensing and real estate, which are in turn shaped by racism, classism, hetero- and transphobia, this has meant that communities and people oppressed and exploited along those lines often create cultural events and media platforms outside of the purview of law, or at least in less visible to it.

At a geographic level, access is structured by norms and expectations that make ‘bad neighborhoods’ more suitable than ‘good ones.’ House parties, street parties, and warehouse parties tend to occur in poor neighborhoods where noise regulations are less enforced and licensing laws can be dodged, or on off nights or late hours when there is more chance of the whole event slipping under the radar. This official neglect does bring with it other risks (including lack of fire inspections). But most participants were at best ambivalent about the value of visibility.

One place where this was less true was in relation to gendered violence. In relation to violence from men to women, in some cases women did wish for increased surveillance and greater presence of security or even police. Race did appear to shape these concerns. White women were more likely to unquestioningly assert the value of police in protecting their safety. Women who expressed concern over racism and police violence (primarily but not exclusively Black women and other women of color) often expressed ambivalence or hostility to police, or said they would not call them even if they felt threatened by a man. This could take shape in many ways - when a perpetrator was Black or brown, or the space was predominantly Black and
brown, many people were ambivalent about inviting the police into that space for any reason, due to concerns that the police would arrest, brutalize or kill the perpetrator but also for the risk of any of that happening to other people in the place who police might also target. Many people felt that the presence of police in any way could be painful and unwelcoming, given the general overpricing and brutality of poor, Black and brown populations.

Protection for or protection from?

As described above, discourses of safety in mainstream media and among state actors tend to focus on quite specific kinds of un-safety. Illegal drugs are themselves discussed as unsafe to the bodies of those that ingest them, but rarely does this lead to investments in drug safety technologies that could regulate or test the content of drugs circulating in a dance music venue while alcohol’s harms to the body are not much attended to. From the perspective of many security guards and law enforcement, many suggest the presence of young men, especially Black and Brown men, are the primary threats to safety. However, even here, concerns tend to focus on male violence committed either between equally guilty male associates and rivals or against bystander victims, often as an offshoot of drug dealing. Gendered and sexual violence is not centered as a social legal or law enforcement problem in the same way.

Interventions by state and private actors in name of safety tend to heighten the risks of being visible to the state and to others as a Black or brown person, while not actually protecting those who are most at risk, most notably Black transgender women, despite this last group being one of the most at risk from violence.

The harms of visibility

The ability of surveillance technology to make aspects of identity visible to the state or to private actors with their own agendas highlights the relationship of intimacy and safety. Some
aspects of identity, particularly queerness or gay, lesbian, bisexual, being transgender or otherwise non-gender conforming, as well as immigration status, may not be immediately visible in public (although it is important to emphasize that the ability to pass is not available to everyone in any of these categories). Thus being made visible as any of these things may put someone at risk. Some scholars of surveillance and security technology have identified gay clubs as having a “well-founded suspicion of the relationship between formal identification structures and persecution.” (Haggerty and Tokar 2012, 131) In the US the most risk is for Black trans women who face astounding levels of violence (including the from the tendency of police to arrest Black trans women and place them in men’s jail cells). It is important to recognize that the state is also complicit in violence through its lack of commitment to stopping others from perpetrating it (through low prosecution of sexist, transphobic and homophobic violence), as well as the active perpetuation of violence by state agents such as police and prison guards.

Thus technologies that make aspects of ones identity more visible and trackable (as being present at a QTPOC night can in itself mark one’s identity if it wasn’t evident before) do not correlate with safety for many people. AS well, scholars of surveillance even in mainstream nightlife point out that many venues adopt technologies of surveillance such as ID scanners (in a pattern familiar to those who study CCTV), as a proxy for reducing harm, rather than because there is any evidence that they reduce harm to anyone. Venues and institutions (including the state) need to demonstrate that they are “doing something,” but the easiest action can to purchase and install of surveillance technologies. In the case of nightclubs, for example, Ericson & Doyle have documented how in Australia insurance companies “working in an empirical vacuum” grant a discount to venues that install CCTV – regardless of the number of complaints or incidents that precede or follow the installation. (Ericson and Doyle 2004) This is similar to the case of Fabric
in London, which was allowed to reopen after installing devices to substantially increase surveillance of its patrons, with no requirement of specific outcomes for safety or reliance on evidence about the efficacy of those devices. Thus technology becomes a proxy for responsibility.

The actual effect of those technologies *even on the harms they purport to care about* is quite unclear. At the same time, they have other effects, well-documented as “mission creep” whereby entities using the technology gather data but use it for other purposes than that which justified the technology’s installation. As well, the people physically in charge of surveillance technologies, often use them for their own, personal purposes that track dominant social dynamics. (Zetter 2012; “TSA Worker Arrested After Jokes, Fight About Size of Genitalia” 2010) Haggerty and Tokar are not alone in describing how security officers using ID scans to harass ex-girlfriends or others they have a personal issue with. (Haggerty and Tokar 2012)

**Surveillance studies and media studies converge on the dancefloor**

Spaces where people engage with dance music, as well as the rest of everyday life, have been permeated by the technologies of watching, recording, storing and broadcasting that have always been a part of media-making. These technologies can be called media technologies but they are also technologies of surveillance. They include both personal devices carried into the spaces by participants, cameras and networked social media tools vetted by event organizers, and those mandated or encouraged by state and insurance or other institutional pressures.

Media studies enters onto the dancefloor in two directions – first, as one understands music as media and the dancefloor as the site in which that media’s meaning is made. The second avenue for media studies on the dancefloor is in relation to the increasing amount of media generated by surveillance technology surrounding people in nightlife, that haunts the
dancefloor. This includes data such as credit card numbers, ID card scans and the metadata that security can attach to them, as well as the facial recognition databases that social media sites use to ask partygoers if they would like to tag their friends in the pictures they upload from their night out. Particular concerns arise from the increase in surveillance media from the dancefloor because of the communities that are most engaged in and even reliant on the dancefloor.

Given this presumed relationship between governance and surveillance, we might put the media of surveillance in a different category from mass media and popular culture. But both surveillance media and mass media can be argued to function to some extent projects in the service of dominant power. (Harry 2014) While technologies that produce surveillance media have tended to be in the hands of the state and corporations and designed to explicitly serve their interests, the platforms by which the public connects and shares their devices of production and circulation are also in the hands of corporations, as well as being regulated and increasingly surveilled by the state.

Surveillance can also be seen as a kind of category of media – it is media that samples, reveals or occasionally represents people and communities. Surveillance is often defined as being tied to institutional power – that is, surveillance is understood as the act of watching with the power to affect the watched based on what is seen, regardless of their wishes. In much surveillance studies literature surveillance is understood as an act of governance.  

15 However, governance here must be understood broadly in the sense of norms and interests that are embedded in the state, but also go beyond it to uphold a broad social and cultural system of white supremacy, (Harry 2014; Julious 2017; Browne 2015) gender inequality, (Glasbeek 2016;}

15 Glasbeek p. 65
A. L. Allen and Mack 1989)\textsuperscript{16} hetero- and cis-normativity(Conrad 2009) and class inequality. All of these concerns are present with increased visibility of the dance floor, and can limit dance music events’ ability to support marginalized communities – or support those with more power at the expense of those with less. “So many places are white safe spaces by default,” Thus the harm of surveillance technologies and surveillance media is derives from old and ongoing hostility to particular dance music cultures and the people who make them.

Mass media is less wholly in the service of the state and corporate power than surveillance media because the sites of engagement, consumption, or meaning-making are not fully controlled by the few. Mass media is engaged with in sites where meaning can be negotiated among a broader public: the social nature of viewing, reading, listening, as well as remixing, commentary, and discussion leaves room for broader meaning-making. But as the tools of media distribution become more widely accessible through networked and mobile technology, it is important to interrogate how and when even individual-made media is surveillance media\textsuperscript{17}. As many nightclub participants pointed out, both through media and in person, people with power - especially white and cis people, are able to intervene and objectify others, something that Harry’s definition of surveillance encapsulates.

Such interventions can reduce the ability of communities to create moments of liberatory media engagement. A key factor is the level of control that communities have over methods and spaces of media engagement. While more often discussed as control in the process of producing media, scholars of music emphasize that what people often call sites of reception are equally intrinsic to its meaning,(Manuel 1993) and thus its ability to be liberating. Meanings created in

\textsuperscript{16}“Women have long experienced what many have described as the social control of the male gaze in public space” Glasbeek p. 65, Allen and Mack

\textsuperscript{17}Harry, everybody watches nobody sees
context are reflexively incorporated into the process of music-making. Popular music in particular “encode[s] specific features of its context, including the nature of its disseminating medium…features such as style language and text content, while significant in own right, are conditioned by the medium with which they are associated” (Manuel 1993, 16) This is especially true for dance music - because it is an embodied and collective engagement, the performance or broadcast (from a DJ) cannot be separated from the social moment of the dance.

The dancefloor is the primary the site of creative engagement with music in a full range of embodied, social practices. “Dance music ensures that listening is never passive consumption. It demands participation, cocreation; it must be practiced.” (Brown 2010, 139) The meaning of any particular musical piece, and its capacity for intimate and liberatory expression is made together on the dancefloor, in living dialogue between dancing people, the dj, and the sounds and references encoded in a particular recording and the recordings before and after it.

Thus the physical and social characteristics of a particular location shape who is present and how they are willing and able to be present. My own research in the material conditions of social engagement with music has demonstrated how forces including noise regulations and copyright law, as well as weather and the history of a particular building or neighborhood can affect the meaning of the music through shaping who participates and how. (Mann 2011)\(^\text{18}\) These forces shape music’s meaning both as it is engaged with in the moment of the dance, and also in terms of the audiences that composers and DJs have in mind when they shape their musical compositions.

This means the convergence of surveillance technologies on nightlife is a terrible focusing of the lens of dominant social order, which recasts the most vulnerable as the most

\(^\text{18}\) Mann, Decolonizing copyright, and JPM
threatening. This convergence limits its ability to be a site of refuge for people and communities who are marked as ‘deviant’ by mainstream society. While dancefloors are a place where people can make these aspects of themselves visible and celebrated, they are also places that for various reasons have been able to make that visibility less dangerous. If we center the needs of QTPOC communities, the first point is that increasing integration with state surveillance and corporate surveillance technologies is not likely to ease safety. Beyond that, the bodily and cultural safety required by these spaces requires that close attention to the harms faced by these communities and a redefinition of the social and legal norms that allow them to continue.