Unmasking Alienation in the Lived Experiences of Songwriters

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A Thesis Submitted to
Slippery Rock University, Pennsylvania
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree of Master of Music Therapy

November 2023

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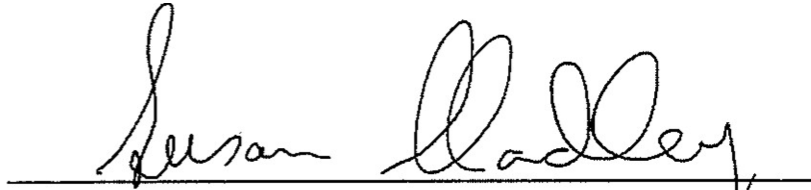
Presented to the

Slippery Rock University
Music Therapy Program



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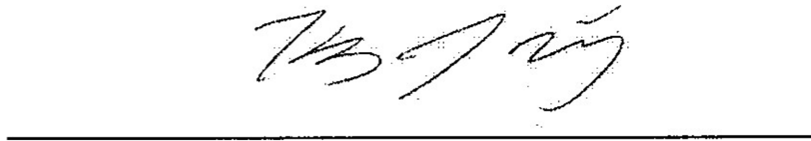

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Abstract

This critical narrative inquiry explores autobiographical narratives of songwriters, calling attention to experiences of *alienation*. Silver's (2018) "wheel of alienation" is the conceptual framework for alienation used in this study: a sociological model synthesizing critical theory (Benjamin, 1935/2008; Brookfield, 2004; Fromm, 1941; Horkheimer & Adorno, 1944/2020), existentialism (Howie, 2014; Jaeggi, 2014; Rae, 2010) and interpretivist sociology broadly (McIntyre, 2008, 2011, 2019; Scarborough, 2017; Silver, 2018). The author provides this multi-factor scaffolding both to identify non-dominant narratives by applying multiple theoretical perspectives (Bruner, 1991; Hadley, 2013b; Morgan, 2002; White, 2007), and to put forth alienation, the "cutting off" of the ability to act on one's own accord within a given social context, as a useful concept in understanding experiences of agency, authenticity, growth and integration–or lack thereof–in our current pluralistic world (Jaeggi, 2014; Kalekin-Fishman & Langman, 2015; Rae, 2010; Silver, 2018). The author interviewed four songwriters about experiences of alienation that emerge within their process of inspiration, drafting, collaboration, performance, recording, touring, marketing, and so on (Cobb, 2016; Long & Barber, 2017; McIntyre, 2008, 2011, 2019). Four themes emerged as salient in the narrative data: interaction with normative expectations, agentic actions, alienation experiences, and communal experiences, which were then separated into subthemes such as discovery of creative agency, split identity, alienation from family, and external/internal ego fixations. Considerations for community music therapy are discussed, as well as how institutions and individuals might foster ecological conditions for more meaningful and sustainable songwriting experiences.

Keywords: alienation, songwriting, systems thinking, critical theory, narrative, agency

Acknowledgments

I'd like to dedicate this thesis to my fellow Pittsburgh teaching artists: Kay, Amos, Dani, David, Zena, N@, and JB, for teaching me what community means, and how its cultivation is often messy, triggering, and limit-pushing. Thank you for helping me re-learn the joy of the music-making process and share it with youth in a warm & affirming space. Thank you for being there for me when I needed a chosen family.

Table of Contents

Abstract iii

Acknowledgments iv

Table of Contents v

List of Tables and Figures vi

What experiences informed this research? ....pp. 2
- How do I situate myself socio-culturally? ....pp. 4
- How was this research informed by music therapy practice? ....pp. 14
- What is the purpose of this study? ....pp. 19

What ideas nourished these questions? ....pp. 21
- What ideas relate to transformation, growth, and integration? ....pp. 24
- What ideas relate to community, ecology, and cultural production? ....pp. 26
- What ideas relate to how songwriters experience alienation? ....pp. 32

What research actions did I take? ....pp. 42
- What knowledge frameworks scaffold this research? ....pp. 42
  - How does subjectivism & critical theory scaffold this study? ....pp. 43
  - How does narrative research scaffold this study? ....pp. 44
- What action steps did I follow? ....pp. 45
  - How were participants recruited? ....pp. 45
  - How were interviews conducted? ....pp. 46
  - How did I analyze the data? ....pp. 47

What did I learn? ....pp. 49
- Meet the participants: What is songwriting to them?...pp. 49
- Three temporal levels of growth & integration ....pp. 53
- Agency/structure dynamics through the levels ....pp. 54
  - What experiences emerged in level I? ....pp. 56
  - What experiences emerged in level II? ....pp. 59
  - What experiences continue to emerge in level III? ....pp. 63
- What were participants' aspirations for system-level change? ....pp. 69

Reflections from level zero ....pp. 71

References ....pp. 75

Appendix A: Semi-structured interview questions...pp. 86

Appendix B: Agentic and non-agentic objects in four dimensions of songwriting ....pp. 88

List of Tables and Figures

Tables

Table 1. *Themes and how they present as subthemes through the temporal levels*………….pp. 68

Table 2. *Agentic and non-agentic objects in the four dimensions of songwriting*……..……pp. 87

Figures

Figure 1. *Silver's (2018) Wheel of Alienation*………………………………………………..pp. 41

"The opposite of alienation is integration, a psychological sense of connection and wholeness. People whose identities are integrated can see a through-line connecting the many selves they have been across various times and places. Every human being changes over time, of course, and alters their behavior depending on the situation or setting they're in. There is no static 'true self' that stops adapting and changing." (Price, 2022, p. 252)

What experiences informed this research?

When you think of a "songwriter," whose image or name comes to mind? What is their gender? Their racial identity? Are they alive or deceased? What is their socio-economic status–are they internationally known with flagrant wealth or a local "starving artist" who also works as a barista? Does a particular songwriter stand out at this moment, given the cultural contexts intersecting for you right now?

I am curious about how normative assumptions–activated by unconscious normative values–impact not only songwriters, but also music therapists and community musicians engaging in participatory songwriting experiences across the inpatient/clinical to community-oriented spectrum (Baker, 2014; Stige and Aarø, 2012). Those of us who engage in Queer theory might suggest *queering* our assumptions about songwriters, as to liberate subjects at the margins of normativity and deconstruct the white supremacist colonial violence embedded in cisheteropatriarchal racial capitalist life (Bain et al., 2016; Gumble, 2019; Robinson, 1989; Scrine, 2019). Queering can show up as active resistance to making normative assumptions about people based on surface-level observations and shifting perspective toward a pluralistic understanding of individuals' unique and socio-culturally situated *lived experiences* (Hadley, 2013, 2021).

I am curious about how shifting away from normative assumptions about songwriters toward an aspirational understanding of their lived experiences might expand our practical, pedagogical, and therapeutic comprehension of the songwriting process: the shared meaning of songs, what it takes to write and perform a song "authentically," notions of process vs. product, community vs. institutional supports, agency vs. structure, marketing artistry, and other complexities that are familiar to those of us who facilitate songwriting across contexts. I want to

know: How do songwriters describe themselves? How does this self-description differ from descriptions in the media and popular culture? How do songwriters experience alienation given the multiple social, psychological, and economic forces impacting them? This line of questioning led to an interest in *the lived experiences of songwriters* as the area of inquiry for the present study.

As a songwriter myself since age 14, I've been consistently impacted by socio-cultural assumptions about songwriters, namely the expectation to fit into a normative gender and sexual presentation and produce songs that are relatable and "marketable," causing a great deal of dissonance in my own embodied process with the expectations of collaborators, listeners, and the music industry at large. While I have also dabbled in musical theater performance, creative writing, guitar & voice pedagogy, and vocal directing, songwriting has been my primary creative outlet from the age of 14. Performing original music, both as the lead vocalist of bands as well as a solo artist, was particularly significant in adolescence and young adulthood, as I spent the majority of my time writing songs, performing songs, booking shows to perform my songs, and investing in recording and promotion to sell my music. Being that these experiences coincided with a vital time for identity development (Brofenbrenner, 1996), this study is part of my ongoing process of forgiving my inner child, who did the best they could. I used songwriting as an emotional regulation and community-building practice in the context of an emotionally lonely and disorienting adolescence as an undiagnosed autistic and closeted queer kid in rural Pennsylvania.

This study examines songwriters' lived experiences, in the form of narratives, through the lens of community music therapy and critical theory. The critical theory tradition (Benjamin, 1935; Brookfield, 2004; Horkheimer & Adorno, 1944/2020; Jaeggi, 2014) consists of research

that critiques social norms and values, while also aiming to change norms that are harmful, discriminatory, and/or violent. After eliciting the stories of four songwriters, I hope to provide a meaningful critique of music consumer culture and how it may reproduce alienating conditions for artists. The present thesis aspires to remain critical of systems, namely colonialist-white-supremacist-cis-heteropatriarchy, and engages in reflexive intrapersonal processes of self-examination, embodied awareness, and cultural positionality (Almeida et. al, 2012; Baines, 2013; Hadley & Norris, 2016; Jun, 2019; Rolvsjord & Stige, 2015; Vera & Speight, 2003). Now that a broad field of inquiry has been introduced– *the lived experience of songwriters*– the following section aims to situate my sociocultural identities, how they may impact the research, and some details on my personal journey as a songwriter, artist, and music therapist.

How do I situate myself socio-culturally?

In the first chapter of the book *Unmasking Autism*–which is titled "Alienation"– social psychologist Devon Price, who is both autistic and trans, describes the alienating experience of life as a masked autistic person (Price, 2022). Then, as a reflection exercise, he invites readers to recall various chronological points in their lives and write thoroughly about blissful moments in which they felt completely "unmasked" and unencumbered. While this exercise was prompted with masked autistic folks in mind, engaging in a process of re-storying our lived experiences is broadly therapeutic, as noted in the narrative therapy and narrative practices literature (Bruner, 1991; Morgan, 2002; White, 2007). Active re-storying, re-telling, and re-membering our stories from the past within the present allows us to decenter our dominant narratives of pain, grief, depression, hardship, and anxiety, revealing non-dominant narratives– connected together like stars in a constellation of meaning– that scaffold self-understanding, growth, and integration

(Buchmeier, 2016; McDonald, 2012). While the following section explicitly follows this "telling and retelling" pattern of composition and analysis, expect that I will implicate the narrative metaphor[1] (Morgan, 2002; White, 2007) as a tool for theorization throughout the study.

The following is a series of autobiographical narratives–and subsequent reflections–which describe how I came to understand myself as a cultural, musical, and racialized being-becoming. Each section begins by describing a moment of bliss, aliveness, and flow during a creative experience, inspired by the aforementioned prompt in *Unmasking Autism* (2022). These narratives of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 2009), which reveal an unencumbered, agentic self free from alienation, illustrate the opposite of social philosopher Rahel Jaeggi's (2014) understanding of alienation as "...always [involving] some failure or disturbance of a self's capacity to lead its own life" (Jaeggi, 2014 in Silver, 2018, p. 22). In Jaeggi's understanding, the self's potential for action is dependent upon both individual agency and the individual's surrounding field–its various and ever-changing *conditions of action*–which together may or may not reproduce alienation, action, or both (Jaeggi, 2014; Kenny, 1989). This will be discussed in more detail in the review of the literature.

Next, for the purpose of situating myself as a culturally-embedded researcher–and with *the lived experience of songwriters*, *the narrative metaphor*, and *conditions of action* in mind– I begin the narrative in middle school, then proceed chronologically, ending with my work as a music therapist and songwriter in the present day…

[1] According to Michael White, one of the founders of narrative therapy, "engaging with the narrative metaphor… invites us to think about how we can encourage people to do what they routinely do – to place the events of their lives into storylines – but in relation to some of the more neglected events of their lives. This opens possibilities for the further development of therapeutic practices that are more de-centring of the therapist and centering on the meaning-making skills of people who consult us" (Dulwich Center, pg. 1).

Childhood: Writing, trombone, and church

The first time I felt this blissful aliveness was when I wrote and directed the "8th grade class: 10 years later" script and it was performed at my older peers' 8th grade graduation ceremony. At the time, I was in 7th grade and my current special interests included playing trombone, video games, sketch comedy (MADtv and SNL), "The Simpsons," and both fiction and nonfiction writing. Throughout the year, I had collaborated with a classmate (who shared an interest in MADtv) on several short "sketches" that were essentially re-creations of "Stewie" from MADtv, an effeminate man who annoyingly switches between acting like a child and acting like a "grown" adult. Eventually, I grew confident in my comedy writing and decided to compose something original to honor the current 8th grade class during their graduation ceremony: performed by the 7th grade class and directed by me. The script featured a "fortune teller" as the main character and narrator, who was visited by each member of the graduating class. As the fortune teller began to describe each student's future, the scene changed to different characters acting out said future. For instance, a student who I'll call Joe wanted to be a teacher in real life, so I wrote his "future scene" as him showing up to the school 10 years in the future while the current math teacher spouted off his same teaching slogans in a comically exasperated manner. It is revealed that Joe was arriving to replace the math teacher. This scene in particular received a lot of laughs at the graduation performance, and I recall the sense of pride I felt in capturing my peers' and teachers' energies, fostering joy and connection amongst those who watched the performance.

At the time I attended a small catholic school in Butler county, 25 miles north of Pittsburgh, PA. The class sizes were extremely small, averaging between 5 and 15 in 7th and 8th grade. In my nine years at the school, there was only a single person of color in the entire school. We attended mass every Friday, at which I played trombone, which allowed me to focus on practicing music as opposed to the religious elements of the mass, which I did not connect to. I also attended mass every Sunday with my family. I would play trombone or handbells at those services as well.

I was immersed in rural western Pennsylvania "middle class" culture, which sat somewhere in between WASP–white anglo-saxon protestant–and working class, constantly trying to distance itself from both. My mother's rationale for sending me to the school was the small class sizes and quality teachers, while my father's was rooted in his own parochial upbringing, which remained a salient part of his identity. My mother, a college professor who achieved the rank of Doctor in my childhood, appeared to shed religiosity as time passed, culminating in her rejection of Catholicism when I "came out" as queer and she realized how much the culture continued to negatively impact me. In hindsight, in terms of the class cultures I mentioned before, my mom aligned with the WASP identity, my dad with the working class identity. As their child, I grew up amidst this cultural tension while also remaining insulated by the comfortable homogeneity of whiteness, which alienated me from the complexity of human diversity while providing me with significant social & material privilege.

This early upbringing, and the cultural assumptions and attitudes that came with it, continue to impact the way I move about the world, and will most definitely impact this research.

In addition to the insulation, being white, middle-class, and growing up in a Christian environment falls in line with the majority perspective. While I no longer practice Christianity, the erroneous assumption that *"everyone is Christian until they say otherwise"* has remained habitual. In addition, the assumption that all Christians experienced Christianity as a source of trauma leads to biased assumptions about Christian people as close-minded, immersed in whiteness, and adjacent to harm-producing practices. As I grew older and learned to hold human complexity through my graduate program, I've found that assumptions about Christians, as well as associating all religiosity with Christian practices, impedes connection with both Christian and non-Christian people. While I have worked on softening my reactivity toward religiosity and painting it with a broad brush, I recognize that it is an ongoing practice of unlearning which may have an impact on this research (Almeida, 2012; Okun, 2021).

Adolescence: Exploring identity through songwriting

Another time I felt fully alive was at age 14, when me and two friends wrote and recorded our first song called "Rocket ship" in a dusty basement with insulation-exposed walls and various junk and craftsman machines strewn about, lit by two exposed light bulbs with just enough space to walk through the various stacks of machinery. This basement became a second home for me throughout high school. It was home to a friend I will call Trey, and he conveniently lived about a mile away from me– which for the rural backroads of western Pennsylvania was extremely close.

Moving back in time slightly, for context: In 8th grade–the last of my nine years at catholic school–I met a friend who moved into town from Texas who would change my trajectory from "pious trombone-playing church boy" to "angsty pop-punk/emo writer and performer." This friend, who I'll call Drew, was openly rebellious, struggled in school, and had a knack for saying or doing the wrong thing at the wrong time. He was my foil in every possible way, and we became quick friends. We spent our afterschool time playing guitar during youth group while the other kids played sports. We attended concerts like Taking Back Sunday and collaborated in a cover band with other peers from school. As we transitioned to public school in 9th grade, which was a new experience for both of us, we met Trey (who had attended a different local catholic school) and decided to get together and form a pop-punk trio which we would eventually call "Fight the Flow."

Going back to the dusty basement: The first time we got together, I played bass and sang lead, Trey played drums, and Drew played guitar and sang backup. It felt like a Blink-182 style origin

story in the making, especially as we began to jam on a fast, jagged 4-power chord progression reminiscent of 1997's Dude Ranch*. As we went on jamming, a melody and story began to emerge, punctuated by the raucous chorus "Rocket shiiiip! [rocket ship]." We decided to record what we came up with that day, developing the verse lyrics as we went. The lyrics were about a group of friends who were craving cheese, so they decided to take a rocket ship to the moon to retrieve said cheese. Silly and ridiculous lyrics; simple and juvenile music, yet we had an absolute blast while learning together how to co-write and record a song. For the following years after this fateful gathering of three angsty catholic school kids, I was overtaken by an obsession with writing, performing, and recording original music.*

As high school progressed, the band changed its name to These Three Words and began writing more complex and "serious" music, which stylistically incorporated midwest Emo, mainstream Emo, and post-hardcore. We attracted a small fandom in our high school and beyond as we consistently performed at community events, school events, and venues around Butler and Pittsburgh. We did everything an up-and-coming band did in the late 2000s: sold tickets for pay-to-play shows, community events, and the occasional opener for a touring band, formed "bro" bonds with other white male dominated bands in the area, recorded music and sold CDs, pressed and sold T-shirts, and even invested in a professionally designed MySpace page.

In addition to whiteness and Christian bias mentioned earlier, my socio-economic status as comfortably middle class allowed my parents to purchase music equipment as well as guitar and voice lessons. This may impact the research in that I do not hold the lived experience of a self-taught musician with limited resources, so I can only understand such an experience from an intellectual perspective. In terms of cultural identity, at this time I started to see myself as "the other" in my cultural context via my internalized queerness and the externalized "anti-establishment" and "anti-normative" subcultures and aesthetics I participated in. I was also starting to feel like an "other" in regards to friends, family, and community and began to use music to both process and express this unspoken sense of otherness and disconnection.

Early College: Wandering & wondering

Another time I felt alive was when I visited Wimpersing, Bayern, Germany and wrote my first song written apart from a band. It was the summer between freshman and sophomore year of undergraduate studies. I had started school as a music education major and switched to music performance (opera) my second semester, which made me realize that I did not want to teach in schools or perform opera. I briefly considered switching to music therapy that summer, but decided to continue on the path of a singer-songwriter and recording artist because the process of making music–and the community we had built around it–felt life-affirming. This was also the

year streaming services emerged into the mainstream. My choir professor instructed all of us to download Spotify as a platform for listening to practice recordings, inducting a generation of music professionals into the Information Age of music consumption.

I traveled to Germany with my family to spend time with relatives on my dad's side at the Schachner homestead: Wimpersing, near Höslwang, Bavaria, roughly 30 miles from Munich. On the plane ride to Germany, I wrote the first verse of a song I would later call "Wimpersing," named after the destination. When we landed in Germany and drove to Wimpersing by rental car, the surroundings felt both familiar and foreign. While the alps in the distance were far taller than any hill in northern Appalachia, the sprawling deciduous forests were not unlike those found in Butler county. While we embarked on some "tourist" trips to both Munich and Salzberg, walking around my family's farm with my guitar was the highlight of my experience. As I walked with my guitar across the Bavarian countryside, exploring the nearby dense woods, winding roads, sprawling fields, the lyrics I wrote on the plane began to take shape into a song. Set to a soaring, floaty, open chord progression, inspired by several City and Colour songs bouncing around my head, my first solo song that felt complete on its own began to germinate, as did a desire to pivot from the band format which was so familiar to me. My desire to explore acoustic, intimate and confessional singer-songwriter music deepened. While playing with the band seemed to keep me working toward my goals, something about this solo music felt embodied, authentic, and in general more ME.

I find it significant that it took leaving Butler County and Slippery Rock contexts to realize a desire for self-fulfillment that lay dormant beneath codependence, self-effacement, and normative aspirations. In terms of cultural identity, I started to splinter myself between idealized (education/formal training/studying/philosophy/music theory/evaluating/conforming) and embodied (performance, artistry, intuition, artistic, creative, transformative); however this embodiment was restricted by the band and the community around it who wouldn't let me be anything other than "the frontman" of an alternative rock band. I was still hiding and ruminating over my sexuality and prioritized embodying a rigid binary gender identity in everyday life.

This impacts research in that the "main push" for songwriting occurred while I was enrolled in college, and it is a privilege to say that I was enrolled, let alone paid for through a mother's tuition reimbursement. While this "split" mentioned earlier was distressful, I benefited from financial support that allowed me to pursue performing while peers of mine were working part or full time jobs.

Late College and Early Career: Growth & integration

Another time I felt alive was performing my song cycle in Swope Music Hall, the Slippery Rock University music department auditorium. Shortly after writing Wimpersing, a lot of things began to shift for me, both musically and personally. My band These Three Words became a five-piece ensemble and released our first full length album entitled Wholes. *We performed in front of a packed house of loyal fans at Altar Bar in Pittsburgh's strip district in January 2011, during which I took five minutes to play Wimpersing in a solo context. Soon after, the band dissolved as two members became caught up in drug use and subsequent dissociation from reality. All the while, my desire to "go solo" continued to snowball into a big gay avalanche of creative inspiration.*

I wrote a song called "Leaving is a Metaphor for Everything" with a friend I knew from gigging in high school who was in my same class in the music department, and soon after set it to a personal, intimate, and revealing music video under the moniker "Sol Persona." The name was conceived from "Sun Persona" or "Sun Mask," i.e., the performative musical "mask" that I express to the world which both hides and re-casts the shadow and the sorrow beneath it: and ultimately emerges in the music itself. In terms of cultural identity, I started to embody myself as queer in my life and in my music. I was "out as gay" to people I knew on campus by the end of Junior year. I was inspired by white queer artists, particularly Perfume Genius, Jonsi of Sigur Rós, and Nico Muhly, then later by Black queer artists like Frank Ocean, Blood Orange, and Janelle Monáe.

The Swope performance solidified my identity as a solo artist and bandleader. Junior year of undergrad, I recruited my friend who I wrote Leaving *with and other student-musicians who played piano, cello, saxophone, and bass clarinet, to instrumentally expand some songs I wrote with just acoustic guitar and voice. I considered my style "chamber pop," as it borrowed elements from a traditional "rock band" as well as instrumental classical music. It was heavily inspired by Western Classical Minimalism–Glass, Reich, Riley–in addition to the queer singer-songwriters mentioned earlier. What made this performance so life-affirming was the way that it integrated my various approaches to musicality and songwriting. It felt both profoundly collaborative and so profoundly personal, while showcasing the strengths I developed in my music training.*

My musical training and lack of significant undergraduate debt put me at a huge advantage in terms of access, resources, and sense of "respectability" as a music professional. While this was most definitely a privilege, I must note that it also became a point of alienation as I started to make connections in the Pittsburgh music scene as a young adult "classically educated" artist. At the time, I started to grapple with a dialectic: a sense of superiority for having a formal music education and a sense of disconnection from what was considered

"popular" and "marketable." Unfortunately, at the time, I lacked the awareness of how the white-supremacist-capitalist-patriarchal culture I lived in and my own internalized white-supremacist-capitalist-patriarchal normative assumptions disrupted the joy that had sparked my initial obsession with writing and recording music.

These two forces kept me off balance and unsure about my initial dream of a career as a singer-songwriter. At the same time artists like Moses Sumney revealed to me new techniques for music creation like vocal looping and embracing an unhinged falsetto register. Shortly after pivoting to one-person-show looping as my primary means of writing and performing, two significant events happened which ruptured my trajectory once again: the 2016 election and the slow downfall of my first committed relationship due to a combination of attachment-based conflict, porous boundaries, trauma bonding leading to codependency, and lack of tools to navigate the complexities of an interracial and interclass queer relationship.

Music Therapy: A shift in context

Between the 2016 election and the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, I completed post-baccalaureate classes in music therapy, passed the board certification exam, and started as a music therapy graduate student and graduate assistant in SRU's gender studies program. I also worked several part time jobs and contract gigs–including vocal directing several musicals– while my romantic relationship continued to decline as we mutually insisted on staying together. At the same time I formed a duo called Kindred Blue with a friend from SRU. Our music was acoustic, soulful, and something like a duo form of Wimpersing with more intricate vocal harmonies and shifting time/key signatures. It was music that felt artful & authentic, and it was an incredible outlet for me during and after my music therapy internship in both inpatient psychiatric and inpatient pediatric medicine settings.

As my duo partner moved on to other ventures, I connected with Maevon Gumble and Braedyn Inmon to participate in the development of gender affirming voicework (gav) while also working as a counseling intern for my graduate-level therapy internship. Voicing in our triad during one of our meetings is my last and final "time I felt alive." It was the most unencumbered I've ever felt vocally. One of the most memorable moments from my time in the "client" role was when I spontaneously started singing the phrase:

"When will I feel at home in my body?"

As I began to repeat it in numerous registers, pitch ranges, and timbres, I felt my words, my voice, and my body integrating with what my spirit needed to express. I felt a similar thrill to when I used to perform in front of rooms full of people, but with a sense of fearlessness and groundedness that I had never accessed before. In that moment I began to unlock my embodiment, my selfhood, and my authentic expression, emerging from beneath the self-effacing and fawning mask that I habitually performed.

Embodiment: A new walk

Around this time, my embodiment practice also changed. I shifted away from "exercises" like running and lifting weights to walking, yoga, and free play movement. I began to recognize how the white supremacist ideas of body image and perfection were impeding me through anxiety and self-hatred, so I decided to take the opportunity–particularly when the pandemic lock down started–to engage in a slower, more embodied relationship with moving about the world (Taylor, 2018). Walking everyday, usually with a dog, became a way of exploring a "new walk": literally a new, more embodied way of carrying myself. A more fluid and feminine walk emerged; a smoother and less rigid pace that felt grounded and embodied. As I walked, I wondered, and sometimes, I wandered. One could say that this research emerged from the lived experience of a Pittsburgh flâneur,[2] strolling the streets of what some colloquially call–and quite snarkily so–"The Paris of Appalachia."

Snarky characterizations aside, walking through certain parts of Pittsburgh feels like time traveling. In my mind's eye it is easy to overlay the landscape with images of soot-filled skies birthed from active smoke-stacks. Row houses butting up against rusty warehouses and brick streets that have been there since the 19th century make me feel like I'm experiencing the past and the present all at once.

As I walked, I felt my becoming-body against the sidewalks of Pittsburgh's Lawrenceville neighborhood. I found my body against the sidewalk in front of the childhood home of the 19th century songwriter Stephen Foster. Nestled off of Penn Avenue, a few blocks from my apartment, the brick medium-sized single family home stands out amongst a sea of small row houses and sparsely inhabited business fronts. The house is the size of a contemporary suburban home, with a fenced-in yard with various unique trees and bushes throughout. As I overlaid the site of the house with a young Stephen Foster in my mind's eye, I wondered: what was different about being a songwriter in that time? What did his white male middle class lifestyle afford him that minority songwriters or those of lower socioeconomic status were not afforded?

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[2] "The concept of the flâneur, the casual wanderer, observer and reporter of street-life in the modern city, was first explored, at length, in the writings of Baudelaire. Baudelaire's flâneur, an aesthete and dandy, wandered the streets and arcades of nineteenth-century Paris looking at and listening to the kaleidoscopic manifestations of the life of a modern city. The flâneur's method and the meaning of his activities were bound together, one with the other… In the twentieth-century Walter Benjamin returned to the concept of the flâneur in his seminal work, *The Arcades Project*. This weighty, but uncompleted, study used Baudelaire's flâneur as a starting point for an exploration of the impact of modern city life upon the human psyche." (Seal, 2013, p. 1).

Emerging from the narrative into the study at hand, curiosity springs forth once again: what remains the same or perhaps has gotten worse? What, if anything, has improved for songwriters? Foster struggled with alcoholism and a tumultuous career until his death at age 35 (Lynch, 2014). In 2018, in a nearby neighborhood of Pittsburgh, a statue of Foster–which featured a Black man playing banjo at his feet–was taken down:

> It was originally commissioned and conceptualized by civic leaders in the late 19th century and completed by sculptor Giuseppe Moretti. The figure of the raggedly dressed banjo player is a fictional character meant to represent an enslaved African-American whose music had supposedly inspired Foster, whose career was launched by songs he wrote for blackface minstrel shows in the 1840s, including 'Oh! Susanna.' (Minstrel shows were for decades the nation's most popular form of commercial entertainment, and lasted into the 20th century.) (O'Driscoll, 2018, p. 1).

In his recent text that provides a non-dominant narrative of the subversive nature of music history, Ted Gioia (2019) names Foster as a representation of the white supremacist hegemony of the time:

> [Foster] built his reputation on nostalgic songs about the Deep South, but he had virtually no firsthand knowledge of the region. His fluency in black culture was a studied pose that makes white rapper Vanilla Ice look like the paragon of authenticity by comparison. But in this instance the appropriator got appropriated. In the two years following the publication of "Oh! Susanna," sixteen other companies released their own arrangements of the song, and Foster could only watch as others reaped the financial benefits of his music. When he died in 1864…Foster had only thirty-eight cents in his pocket. But the robbery of musical intellectual property was already an established American tradition…the country's national anthem was a rip-off on a British song, and the early music business…operated in blissful ignorance of copyright royalties (p. 314-315).

Moving from the origin of songwriting in the U.S. to today, harmful conditions continue to impact working songwriters in the 21st century music industry. The concept of "The 27 club" remains pervasive in American culture, which is a colloquial recognition that singers, performers, and singer-songwriters frequently die young, specifically the age of 27: the most common examples being Jimi Hendrix, Amy Winehouse, Janis Joplin, Jim Morrison, and Kurt Cobain. While Wolkewitz et. al (2011) mentioned that there is no research validating the number

27 as correlated with deaths, they also state that "health concerns are prevalent for musicians in their 20s which place them at a greater risk for developing chronic mental health conditions" (p. 1).

Now that I have situated my sociocultural position and provided context for my personal experience with songwriting, the next section describes how the research topic emerged and developed through my work as a music therapy intern in a music studio-oriented group within a psychiatric hospital, and more recently as a teaching artist/MT-BC at a music studio-oriented afterschool program, both of which involved collaborating with adolescents on writing original songs.

How was this research informed by music therapy practice?

Pittsburgh-born musician Mac Miller died September 7th, 2018 at the age of 26, days before I started my first week of my music therapy internship at a psychiatric hospital, also at the age of 26. While I personally wasn't a fan of Miller at the time, the news of his death deeply impacted the Pittsburgh community. Miller's status as a well-respected rap icon, public struggles with relationships and substance use, and untimely death led me to questions about the psycho-social health of songwriters in our current hyper-publicized, mass-marketed and abuse-laden culture. These questions aligned well with a group I had the opportunity to co-lead twice a week at the psychiatric hospital: a "recording studio" group for teens diagnosed with bipolar disorder. The group consisted of various experiences to generate original writing, poetry, and songs and the opportunity to co-create beats on a DAW, primarily operated by the lead music therapist. My role in the group was to prompt writing, spontaneous musicking like freestyles, encourage peer collaboration and support, accompany students on guitar or piano, and provide refocus and redirection strategies to encourage sustained engagement with the creative process.

A few older participants who experienced the "revolving door phenomenon"[3] (Botha et. al, 2009) had been through the program a number of times and built up a catalog of recorded songs which told a complex, non-linear narrative of identity development, as both a songwriter and as a categorized-as-Mad[4] teen. Many of these revolving door teens came from under-funded communities and had guardians who lacked the resources to care for their mentally ill child, which often escalated into violent actions that resulted in the teen being involuntarily admitted to the hospital (From nursing notes accessed during internship). I wondered if, like them, I would have made music in a psychiatric hospital as a teen, had I grown up without access to support and resources that afforded me physical protection, psychological ease, and material comfort throughout my teen years. One of the more frequent revolving door participants was discharged for a few weeks, only to return again under similar circumstances: picking up their songwriting where they had left off.

While I was advised by a supervisor to focus on the participants' goals for their recovery while in the hospital–which I agree makes pragmatic sense–in the back of my mind, I was overcome with curiosity of how these participants interacted with songwriting outside of the hospital. I wondered what community resources were available for youth songwriters–or simply how adolescents would benefit from songwriting/writing as a community-embedded healing practice, especially for those who enforceably became psychiatric consumers, frequently

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[3] "Due to […] available beds, even those patients who were admitted could stay in hospital for only a brief period and had to be discharged within days to a few weeks after admission. The inevitable result has been that some patients have had to be discharged prematurely in order to accommodate those who were more severely ill. This has resulted in high readmission rates and led to the birth of the concepts of the 'revolving door.'" (Botha et. al, 2009, pp. 2)

[4]"Mad Studies advocates reject medicalized terminology and move from explanations of individual 'abnormality' to person-in-context, within the larger world of history, politics, poverty, trauma, and relationships […] Mad Studies, in essence, locates Madness, or in other words, mental dis-ease within a social context, and remove it from a biomedical explanation." (Laufer, 2021, p. 1)

isolating them from community. I grew curious about the liminal space between inpatient care and community care, and how music therapy might play a role in that.

Shortly after, I began engaging with material from "Systems thinking in Music Therapy," a course in Slippery Rock University's Master of Music Therapy program, which led me to the Community Music Therapy (CoMT) paradigm (Baker et al., 2017; Stige and Aarø, 2012). CoMT helped me to re-conceptualize my music therapy philosophy toward ecological, systems-dependent, and sociological theories that I hadn't been exposed to in undergraduate courses. Carolyn Kenny's *Field of Play* (1989) inspired me to envision theory-creation within the music therapy profession. I began to conceptualize myself working across institutional and community contexts, utilizing my adaptable music therapy skills as resources and bridging knowledge across contexts, while facilitating bonding within communities through participatory music processes (Stige and Aarø, 2012). This new framework for understanding my scope of practice, understood as "ecological" by Bruscia (2014, pp. 618-639), led me to accept a position as Teaching Artist at a music studio-oriented after school program in Pittsburgh. As synchronicity would have it, one of the programs I helped to facilitate was funded through the Mac Miller foundation.

Working in this new space was an opportunity to put Community Music Therapy theory into practice, applying ecological (Hawitt, 2020; Ruud, 2020) and systems thinking (Kenny, 1989; McIntyre, 2008) to the context of an afterschool program for teens and summer camp sessions for younger children. In this highly collaborative and community-embedded context, youth behaviors and their overlapping contexts tend to inform one another. I navigated this role as a white colonizer in a Black community attended by mostly Black teens. *The work* for me was to be authentically "me" as a teaching artist–and not as an intern-therapist, as I was previously,

in which the relationships I formed were strictly "clinical." *The work* for me was also to be authentically "me" without centering my white perspective or filtering my participants' experiences through eurocentric understandings of music, health, and wellness. *The work* for me was also providing musical experiences and participatory frames that were culturally relevant, having not been immersed in that culture at any point in my life. *The work* for me was facilitating bridging and bonding in a Black community context without centering myself or my work–and its associated whiteness–in the process (Almeida, 2012; Baines, 2013; Brown, 2019; Hadley & Norris, 2016; Okun, 2021; Rolvsjord & Stige, 2015; Stige and Aarø, 2012).

When I stepped into this role, I was often asked by other music therapists and local artists if I was "a hip-hop guy." I answered that I am someone who enjoys and engages with hip hop, but I don't claim to be part of the culture. The resources I brought to the space–socio-emotional skills in the context of making music, vocal pedagogy and performance training, music theory, and guitar/piano skills–were assets to the space, and could remain so without claiming access to an already-established hip-hop culture. I found myself engaging with the students as a learner: from a resource-oriented perspective, they often had "hip hop skills" within and around them (Rolvsjord, 2016). There were times when I wasn't teaching anything, per say, at least in terms of the hip-hop specific aspects of this work space. I provided a container for them to participate in their own culture and express themselves in self-affirming ways. CoMT and the resource-oriented model helped me to co-facilitate pre-existing cultural practices that promote healing and amplify underheard voices, particularly queer and trans youth in the program (Stige and Aarø, 2012). This way of working developed alongside my previously mentioned collaboration with Maevon Gumble and Braedyn Inmon, collaboratively codifying gender affirming voicework (gav) as a method (Gumble, 2019). This work influenced my work at the

community studio by providing a framework for affirming the gender expansiveness of myself as well as the youth and co-workers in the space. Developing gav honed my attention toward lived experience and embodied Self-determination, allowing me to hold the complexity of participants' gendered narratives, which consisted of both cultural influences–including white supremacist bio-essentialism–and individual identity and expression.

To say a bit more about how this teaching artist experience brought me to this research: there was a persistent self-evaluation of songs as likable or unlikable "products" and a persistent desire for teen songwriters to "make it big," "get signed," and/or "prove the haters wrong" (anecdotal) through creating music that aligns with their idea of peer acceptance and career success. While I didn't use the term "alienation" at the time, I encountered students desiring to publicly release music that they spent less than 20 minutes on before moving on to the next attention-grabbing venture. I encouraged returning to songs after setting them aside, or combining "unfinished" musical and lyrical ideas to create one track, much like Tamplin's (2006) song collage technique.

The balance of individual creative process and how/when to share a "final product" was a salient topic among both participants and staff facilitators in this workplace, and these questions inevitably found their way into my research questions and subsequent interview questions. As you will see in Appendix A, I asked participants to describe their songwriting process "from conception to release" to take stock of any alienating elements of a songwriting practice moving from process to product, and what it feels like to release music publicly from a lived experience perspective. I became curious about the ways in which our "culture industry" might reproduce a product-focused orientation (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1944/2020), and how it might impact the agency of songwriters and songwriting as a community-embedded practice (DeNora & Ansdell,

2017) and/or clinical intervention (Baker et al., 2008; Baker, 2014; Silverman, 2011, 2012, 2019).

What is the purpose of this study?

The purpose of this study is to elucidate the lived experiences of working class songwriters in order to co-create a thick description of "songwriter": an alternative to the thin, dominant narratives (Hadley, 2013, 2021) put forth by popular culture, mass media and the music industry. As a teaching artist in an after school program/community music studio, I observed that for young songwriters, their creative actions are embedded within structures and expectations of the music industry. These structures and expectations tend to reify their music as a commodity to be "liked" and sold, inviting songwriters into some combination of dancing with, resisting, and adhering to normative expectations within their own embodied process (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1944/2020; Jenkins, 2008; Long & Baber, 2017; Sutela et. al, 2017). As my research questions developed, I related the subsequent experience of the songwriter, whose works become fetishized and consumed as commodities, to the concept of *alienation* as defined by a young Karl Marx, and later developed by The Frankfurt School of Critical Theory, sociologists, and social philosophers (Marx, 1932/2007; Jaeggi, 2014).

In my work as music therapist and teaching artist, I have observed clients experiencing alienation on micro, meso, macro levels—both within and outside of therapy sessions—and in varying degrees of intensity and visibility. While not a diagnosis in the DSM, alienation is a pervasive phenomenon that impacts humans regardless of age, race, or social status. I myself have been alienated in various ways, often blaming myself for the anxiety and depression I felt from being cut off from others as a queer person and parts of myself as an undiagnosed autistic person. Whether encountering alienation in clients' lives or experiencing it in my own life, I

have found that identifying the ways we are cut off, excluded, isolated, and separated by social systems is often the first step toward increasing integration, belonging, understanding, and wholeness (Kenny, 1989).

Might alienation be a contributing factor to the adverse health outcomes for songwriters in their 20s and 30s? What intrapersonal, interpersonal, and systemic barriers exist to creating work that is meaningful and sustainable? As a music therapist who facilitates therapeutic songwriting as both a clinical intervention and a community-centered culturally-embedded practice, what wisdom might I gain from critically analyzing the lived narratives of practicing songwriters? After taking some time to sit with these complex inquiries, the following research questions emerged as salient:

1. How does songwriting promote transformation, growth, and integration?
2. Based on the lived experiences of songwriters, how might institutions, collaborators, and cultural workers co-construct a community arts ecology that supports sustainable and meaningful music collaboration, production, and performance?
3. How do songwriters experience alienation, and how does it impact their work?

What ideas nourished these questions?

As I mentioned earlier, I took a class entitled "Systems thinking in music therapy" as a part time student in Fall 2019. Systems concepts were germinating in my mind–namely Carolyn Kenny's *Field of Play* theory and Stige and Aarø's book *Invitation to Community Music Therapy*–as we transitioned into the pandemic and I transitioned into understanding an interdependent way of engaging with the world. Throughout my short time as a music therapy intern before the COVID pandemic and a graduate counseling intern during the "telehealth only" era of 2020, it occurred to me that the care networks that our society has in place are deeply flawed. Both of my first experiences as a therapist revealed more about what was wrong with the current healthcare system than what was right about it: from witnessing the violence of the revolving door phenomenon mentioned earlier, to living through a graduate counseling internship with a supervisor who was dismissive, judgemental, and generally under-equipped to supervise me. Fortunately, following my second unpaid internship, I was blessed to move into paid, "non-clinical" work that embraced the community-centered and ecological practices that music therapists are capable of, and ultimately working at the aforementioned afterschool program kept me in the graduate program and in the profession.

One of my first experiences as a board-certified music therapist was that I was featured on the *Clinical Bopulations* podcast for an episode of their season exploring original songs by music therapists who are also songwriters (Banzon et. al, 2020). This episode was recorded in March, two weeks before I passed the board certification exam. We discussed my song "Speckles"–which I had been interviewed about for local radio station WYEP years earlier– both in terms of my inspiration and process for writing the song, as well as how it might be incorporated into a music therapy experience. While it felt a bit strange to talk about a song I had

written over six years ago, the conversation felt like a lovely "invitation" into the field, and one that warmly embraced all parts of myself: musical, creative, spiritual, cultural, and clinical. Allyson and I discussed the benefits and pitfalls of playing songs which don't necessarily align with our current state of mind–which was an affirming and warm exchange that feels relevant to the current study. I also discussed the thought process that led me to shift away from songwriting as my ultimate goal toward music therapy:

> [In 2015, when I released the song,] I was very much caught up in the "oh, I'm trying to push this on social media, and get folks to listen to it, and get people to come to my performances"… recently I just to got a point where I'm like "I'm just not doing that anymore. That's not me." When I experience the songs now, I'm actually able to see them a bit more clearly than I was then because I'm not so caught up in the marketability of it–which is actually part of the motivation I had for pursuing music therapy because I felt like my heart was…crumbling under the weight of capitalism (laughs) […] I just put so much pressure on myself to be a unique artist and write authentic stuff, and now I'm able to look back on those songs and be like "that was a great experience. I'm glad I did that" (Banzon et. al, 2020).

This podcast conversation–during my first semester taking graduate classes full time–informed my desire to study songwriting more in-depth. Interviewing songwriters through a podcast was involved in one of the first significant studies that I came across in my research: Long and Barber's (2017) "Conceptualizing creativity and strategy in the work of professional songwriters." This study explores how songwriters balance creativity with the demands of the music industry. It felt so similar to what I was interested in researching that I thought I might have to change my topic. Instead, I envisioned my research as a critical appraisal of songwriters' experiences and how certain dominant narratives and power relations may hinder authenticity, growth, and integration. Long and Barber also conducted hour-long semi-structured interviews with songwriters and framed songwriters as cultural workers within the context of a market-based system.

> What does it mean to write a song? While all musicians might be expected to be creative in some way, writing songs is not something all do or indeed are able to do [...] our concern here lies in understanding the place of the song in a value chain of production for those who do. We thus extend our query to ask: how do songs and songwriters emerge? Who writes songs and why? How do songs take the form that they do? In fact, what does a songwriter recognize as a song? In order to address these questions therefore, we explore accounts from professional songwriters regarding their conceptualization of creativity. In so doing, we focus on their strategies for its cultivation in the production of songs understood as a particular form of a musician's work. (Long & Barber, 2017, pp. 1)

Long and Barber are also songwriters themselves, and there is a focus on lived experience in their research. In some sense you could say the current study is a critical line of flight[5] (Deleuze & Guattari, 1972) from Long and Barber: one that asks specific follow-up questions to the questions they posed, and explores granular experiences of struggle and disconnection which break through into greater agency and transformation for songwriters. I discuss this study before delving into other literature–separated by research questions–because the findings here are foundational to all of my questions.

I was elated to find out through my exploration of this topic that in 2018 a "Songwriting Studies Conference" was held in the UK. Both Long and Barber as well as McIntyre–who will be discussed in more detail in the next section–were the primary presenters at the conference. Their work is situated in the UK and Australia, so the present study–which features songwriters from various cities in the U.S.–is an important extension of their work in this area.

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[5] "According to the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze (1925-1995)... lines of flight are bolts of pent-up energy that break through the cracks in a system of control and shoot off on the diagonal. By the light of their passage, they reveal the open spaces beyond the limits of what exists. In a series of books written with the militant psychotherapist Felix Guattari (1930-1992), Deleuze linked human creativity to flight. It is our desire to escape the status quo that leads us to innovate…We coordinate, form alignments, combine our powers and innovate. We remake the world on creative trajectories." (Rayner, 2013, pp. 1)

What ideas relate to transformation, growth, and integration?

Songwriting led by a board-certified music therapist frequently aims to co-facilitate change, which depending on the level of practice, may incorporate transformational, holistic, and integrative goals (Bruscia, 2014; Kenny, 1989; Scrine, 2019). Outside of the music therapy context, transformation, growth, and integration through songs and songwriting are explored in the fields of education and psychology. Quayle and Sonn (2019) conducted a narrative inquiry which focused on how indigenous-elder-led songwriting practices promoted survival, pride, resilience, and healing. They describe a program called Community Arts and Cultural Development (CACD), which aligns with the practices of CoMT. CACD involves collaborative work between artist-organizers and community members "to express identity, concerns, and aspirations through the arts…" (p. 3): in this case, storytelling workshops to dissuade violence among youth through intergenerational engagement with cultural stories. The study suggests that in times of cultural conflict, connecting to the past is an effective means of transforming the present. McDonald (2012) presented a doctoral study about healers' experience of spontaneously emerging songs. The study focuses on healers of the icaros culture, for whom community healers serve as guides of Ayahuasca ceremonies:

> The findings suggest the possible use of healing songs, which are non-invasive, in healthcare settings as part of a potentially more holistic approach to recovery. Its significance might also be individual: singing songs daily or regularly can be empowering, as (for these healers) healing songs are known to carry the power of spiritual worlds in the sounds. (McDonald, 2012, pp. 6)

In music therapy, 18 studies emerged in my search that included the words "song" or "songwriting" and/or focus on songwriting as a clinical intervention, and all published after 2005. 2005 is the year that Baker and Wigram published *Songwriting: Methods Techniques and Clinical Applications for Music Therapy Clinicians*, *Educators and Students*, which may suggest

that this text was a key turning point in the critical examination of songwriting practices in the music therapy field. Clinician-scholars in music therapy have studied songwriting in mental/behavioral health contexts (Baker et al., 2008; Baker et al., 2016; Myers-Coffman et al., 2020; Silverman, 2019, 2012, 2011), medical contexts (Viega & Baker, 2017), hospice (Anderson, 2012), music therapy supervision (Phair, 2022) and community contexts (Baker et al., 2017). In terms of methodology within the 18 studies about songwriting, they used arts-based methodologies (Viega & Baker, 2017), grounded theory (Baker, 2014) and phenomenology (Clark et al., 2021). Data gathering methods include lyric analysis (Fiore, 2016) and semi-structured interview (Lindblad & de Boise, 2020). There are currently no studies in music therapy about songwriting which use narrative inquiry as a methodology, and no studies which apply a sociological analysis to the lived experiences of songwriters.

Scrine (2019) recognized songwriting with young people as an after-queer approach to exploring gender identity and expression, which emerged for me as one of the most salient studies in music therapy when it comes to songwriting and transformative processes. Scrine's conclusion not only aligns with my understanding of songwriting's transformative utility, but also employs the narrative metaphor as a tool for liberatory praxis when working with youth:

> Songwriting allowed for a) repositioning the young people as the authorities of their own experience; b) repositioning their experiences not as a subject for investigation or informant for political progress, but as materials through which to envisage alternative narratives; and c) repositioning their narratives not simply as research data, but as their own creative object, for purposing and repurposing. (Scrine, 2019, pp. 1)

Although briefly mentioned earlier, it is important that I spend time here addressing how CoMT aligns with my research questions. While it certainly has implications for growth and integration like the aforementioned forms of music therapy, its impacts tend to occur on a

broader ecological scale. This macro, structural logic aligns more with the second research question, which concerns the ecological systems that surround and influence songwriters.

What ideas relate to community, ecology, and cultural production?

Community music therapy considers how musicians might bridge resources–or social, cultural and symbolic capital–as a way to facilitate community healing and integration. CoMT is a practice of bringing justice to the agency/structure dichotomy through musicking. Stige and Aarø (2012) write:

> The ecological metaphor suggests that there are several interacting levels of activity in human life, such as individual, group, organization, locality, and various macrosystems. Community music therapy practices actively explore the socio-cultural ecology created by reciprocal relationships between these levels of organization. The levels can be understood as nested; lower levels are embedded in higher levels. For instance, a microsystem is a group of individuals that relate to each other in a setting, while an organization encompasses many microsystems. (pp. 153)

In terms of studies outside of music therapy, but similar to CoMT, Haddox (2019) engaged youth in call-and-response songwriting in West Virginia to spark conversations about the past, present, and future of their communities. This is another example of transformation occurring through communal engagement with cultural traditions. Continuing on community-building through songwriting, Hess (2019) recommends a pedagogical approach based on the practices of activist-musicians. They write:

> As a medium, music explores identity in ways that create opportunities for education and build community. "Identity music" can also mobilize groups to act against forces that would oppress them, enabling them to speak back powerfully, while maintaining the complexities of identities contrapuntally and allowing the contradictions to exist without resolution… The ideas and identities communicated in the varied musics were inherently messy. This messiness created unique opportunities for resonance, as audiences experienced these expressions of identity as fundamentally human. (Hess, 2019, pp. 11)

Taking a more ethnographic approach, McIntyre (2008) collected data while working various roles in the Australian music industry, interviewing and observing hundreds of

songwriters over the course of 10 years. Foundational to the goals of the present study, McIntyre's findings allow me to enter analysis acknowledging that songwriting is a creative *system*, so that I can then critique the system from a Marxian-Simmelian perspective. McIntyre's systems model of popular music songwriting reveals the ecological relationships that make up the songwriting process, writing that

> [The western popular music songwriting] system comprises a *domain* of knowledge, a *field* or social organization that understands that knowledge, and an *individual* whose task it is to make changes in the domain. The system in this case has circular causality, as it may not necessarily start with an individual but may be instigated by any component within the system (pp. 2).

His theory is based on French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's understanding of the domain, field, and habitus as components of what he calls *cultural production*. Bordieu's (in Jenkins, 2008, pp. 67-102) theoretical model claims to resolve the agency/structure dichotomy by giving equal credence to embodied action and structural influence. Bordieu's theories of cultural production, cultural/symbolic/social capital, and habitus are also named by Stige and Aarø (2012) as theoretical foundations of Community Music Therapy practice.

How do songwriters acquire knowledge of a domain?

In his study, McIntyre names the domain of knowledge as "Western popular music songwriting," and his analysis focuses on critiquing the grand narrative of the romantic genius archetype, which essentially believes artists to be exceptional geniuses. In reality, the skills to create work as a songwriter are made available through several different social and educational arrangements, and individuals we know as "songwriters" are the ones who choose to synthesize and practice those skills. McIntyre provides a list of different avenues through which individuals acquire knowledge of the domain of popular music songwriting:

1. Having access to poetic skills seen as akin to lyric writing skills in the formal education process

2. Having access to elementary music lessons as part of the compulsory schooling system
3. Receiving semi-formal instruction from musicians engaged in private tuition
4. Learning songs as part of learning an instrument
5. Learning songs for performance
6. Engaging in a degree of auto-didacticism through access to peer information and ad-hoc mentoring within a form of oral transmission of domain knowledge (p. 8).

On its simplest level, songwriting practice is skillfully combining words and music to create something moving, interesting, cathartic, intense, silly, or heartbreaking. Of course this changes based on the cultural context on micro and macro levels, which can be observed in how the form of songs has changed over time via the music history literature. For me, I gained the skill of writing through schooling and consistent practice outside of school, and developed music skills separately before putting them together in songwriting. There is no single way to write songs or even to acquire knowledge of the music industry. Individual songwriters access a particular combination of formal and informal education–of varying levels of duration and quality–leading to limitless understandings of what the songwriting process looks and feels like. Online learning resources further expand the possibilities of songwriting and music industry pedagogy. The level of the field, explored in the next section, mediates domain knowledge through field-specific creative practices and socio-cultural traditions.

How do songwriters engage with fields within western popular music?

Fields are structured spaces that are organized around a domain of knowledge and they function to determine whether or not something new can be incorporated into the domain. So, how does the field mediate what becomes part of the domain? What traditions scaffold the songwriting process in a given field, and how do these impact the conditions of action for the artist? As an example of fields that mediate what becomes part of the domain of western popular music, I provide the examples of Nashville songwriting culture and Hip-hop culture.

Cobb (2016) researched songwriters in the Nashville music scene, which could be described as the primary field of the American Folk and American Country Music domains, which overlap with the broader domain of western popular music described in McIntyre (2008, pp. 7-8). She found that there was a particular culture which songwriters have to be privy to in order to have any chance of getting their music heard. So, even songwriters who are extremely skilled and well resourced, may not "make it" in Nashville if they don't adapt to the expectations of the field, a field which according to Nussbaum (2023) is divided amongst the white supremacy-tinged "bro-country" scene (which gained hegemony around the 2003 black-balling of The Dixie Chicks for their denouncement of the Iraq war), and a wave of queer, Black, and female artists reclaiming the pluralistic folk origins of "music city" through community advocacy concerts (pp. 1).

The origin of Hip-hop culture remains controversial: some saying it originated in Jamaica, while others naming the Bronx, New York City as its birthplace, sometime in the 1970s. From the 1970s to today, Hip-hop has grown exponentially–alongside its primary instrument, the drum machine–from a hyper-local cultural practice to a global popular culture, lifestyle, and industry. Hip-hop is a cultural field rooted in Black American practices of MCing, DJing, Breakdancing, and Graffiti that express the non-dominant narratives of Black people living under racial capitalism–making it both an artistic practice and a cultural liberation practice. Today, the Hip-hop music aesthetic is supremely influential in the western popular music domain, while also frequently co-opted by individuals and labels who largely remove the cultural and liberatory aspects of the genre, prioritizing solely what styles, topics, and aesthetics are most marketable to a global audience. Songwriters working within the Hip-hop field utilize a combination of sampling, beat-making, rapping, melodic hooks, and electronic and acoustic instrumentation that

varies based on the creative influences of the songwriter and the particular zip code they grew up in. Subfields–or subgenres–have emerged within Hip-hop, revealing a plethora of aesthetics in this expansive field. For instance, the subfield of "conscious rap" features laid-back instrumentation, philosophical lyrical wordplay, and explicitly political themes–epitomized by artists like A Tribe Called Quest, Kendrick Lamar, and Lauryn Hill–while the subfield of "trap" features intense instrumentation, jagged staccato lyrics, and simple, straightforward, and often traditionally masculine themes: epitomized by artists like Future and Gucci Mane. While conscious rap emerged from conditions in New York City, trap is rooted in Southern Black American traditions. From my perspective as a white colonizer who worked in a Hip-hop-infused community studio, stories that Hip-hop songwriters tell–through lyrical content, nonverbal communication, movement, dress, choice of instrumentation, flow, attitudes, and affects–are imminent[6] expressions of their socio-cultural and material conditions.

How do songwriters embody a habitus?

How does an individual songwriter use their agency to create a unique place for themself given the cultural practices and resources at their disposal? From an embodied perspective, which practices become integrated into the way they choose to move about the field? Cobb (2016) describes the difference between the "channeling artist" vs. "the master craftsman" (p. 150-185). While the channeling artist approaches songwriting intuitively and spiritually, feeling as though the songs move through them and they have little control over them, the master craftsman takes a more methodical, logical and "compositional" approach. Cobb's research concludes that making a living songwriting in Nashville is a process of inquiry and action:

[6] "From the Latin *manere,* meaning to remain within, as distinct from to go beyond or outside of; a term used generally to designate the self-sufficiency and interiority of being. Immanence is opposed to transcendence, although it is sometimes used as complementary to it." (Encyclopedia.com, 2018)

inquiry into the systems of creativity & economy that make up the songwriting ecosystem, and taking creative action in the form of writing authentic, complex, and relatable songs.

Returning to McIntyre (2008), he employs systems theory in accordance with Bourdieu to understand individual creativity in terms of songwriting *habitus,* which accounts for both agency and structure. Bourdieu's notion of habitus is a sense of "knowing" how to act in a particular field. Philosopher Helen Ngo (2012) states that for Bourdieu, "Habitus serves as an ever-present structure—or a structuring structure—through which behaviors and interactions are formed, so thoroughly shaping them that one cannot step outside its influence" (p. 10). It is a "feel for the game" that encompasses how individual songwriters find creative lines of flight working within a field. Habitus is the way that individuals perceive the social world around them and react to it. Habitus is usually shared by people with similar backgrounds, such as social class, religion, nationality, ethnicity, education, and profession. We acquire it through processes of imitation, often beginning before we can remember. The songwriting habitus is each individual's embodied approach to song conception, writing and editing process, collaboration style, and style of marketing and releasing songs to the public. It is the result of a complex mix of group culture and personal history.

How am I expanding on McIntyre's work in this research?

The current study moves beyond the McIntyre (2008) model into structural criticism through critical theory. In the present study, there is more of a focus on how capital–social, cultural, and economic–impacts one's ability to maintain the habitus of a songwriter. My conception of songwriting as a process involves things like social media and artist marketing; that is, questions around how songwriters actually make a living are central. As opposed to simply identifying a larger system at play–in opposition to a "romantic genius" narrative–in

songwriting creativity, this study takes that fact as a given and seeks to critique the system, particularly how it distributes capital inequitably and cuts off songwriters from authenticity, other people, and their work. Although mentioned only briefly by McIntyre (2008), Bourdeiu's three forms of capital are another theoretical consideration that I find relevant for this study.

> Bourdieu is concerned with three forms of capital: economic, cultural, and social, each operating in a different field. Among them, social capital, which neither derives from nor is independent of the other forms, comprises social responsibilities, connections, or linkages, and under certain circumstances is convertible into economic capital. Bourdieu also considers the family to be a basic source of social capital, mainly found among the socially powerful in the upper middle class or *haute bourgeoisie* ; the ideal-typical institutionalized form of social capital is the nobility title. By contrast, the lower social strata do not possess capital, including social capital (Bourdieu 1986, 2001, in Encyclopedia.com, 2018, p. 1).

Moving briefly from theory to practice, the afterschool program mentioned earlier is an example of a "community arts ecology": a fully staffed professional recording studio located within the neighborhood community center. By connecting rhizomatically with several other community ecologies through the Hip-hop field, we provided material resources like DAWs for music-making, knowledge acquisition in the form of songwriting and music technology skills, and social capital through working with local teaching artists who provide opportunities for youth to connect with the local music community.

What ideas relate to how songwriters experience alienation?

I had to forage outside the music therapy field for literature on alienation, as there are no studies that explicitly explore this phenomenon. I found it necessary to read sociological and philosophical literature on the topic, starting with Marx and making sense of how alienation has been understood since the mid-1800s. In the years before writing his paramount work, *Capital* (Marx, 1867), Marx laid out his concept of alienation in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844,* which wasn't published until the 1930s (Marx, 1932/2007). Alienation, for a 26-year-old Marx, described how capitalist systems of production cut workers off from

themselves, from the product of their labor, from their fellow workers, and from their human essence, or species-being. Similar to how natural ecologies are impacted by the unmitigated growth and exploitation of capitalism, social ecologies–even the most well-meaning and well-resourced–perpetuate exploitation and forms of social extraction that enable alienation in the four forms laid out by Marx.

Marxian alienation theory has waxed and waned, shifting from economics and materialism (Marx, 1867) into the "cultural marxism" of the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1944/2020), to a pluralistic, existentialist, and embodied understanding in the twenty-first century through Rae (2010), Jaeggi (2014), and Silver (2018). The salient trajectory of my thought landed on the Silver (2018) model, which provided me with historical knowledge of the concept as well as a heuristic tool, the wheel of alienation, which scaffolded my application of the concept to the present analysis. Being that this model informed my thinking about alienation, I find it important to summarize Silver's historical understanding of alienation and explain how the wheel of alienation will theoretically scaffold participants' narratives. The following is a summary of Silvers' (2018) theoretical influences in regard to alienation, namely Karl Marx (1932/2007) and Georg Simmel (1900/1978) as classical sociological foundations, and Rahel Jaeggi (2014) in contemporary social philosophy, who draws from both critical theory and existentialist philosophy.

How did Marx understand alienation within the sphere of production?

Predecessors of the Marxian tradition of alienation include Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the highly influential Genevan who created the schema but didn't use the word, and G. W. F. Hegel, who introduced the topic of alienation to German Idealism (Sim & Van Loon, 2012; Jaeggi, 2018). Following in line with the German Idealist tradition begun by Immanuel Kant, Hegel

(1807/1979, in Spencer & Krause, 2002) defined alienation in the realm of ideas– "absolute spirit"–which considered the human being's capacity for idea creation to be the essence of God itself. While his predecessor Kant introduced the concept of separating science from religion, Hegel "wants to make religion a kind of science" (Rius, 1989, p. 20). Marx came to reject Hegel's spiritualism, as well as his loyalty to the state, and instead developed scientific materialism to describe worker alienation and revolutionary potential, particularly in his later works (Marx, 1867; Rius, 1989; Sim & Van Loon, 2012).

In his early works, however, Hegel's influence was more present, and it is here where Marx detailed his understanding of alienation. In his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx (1932/2007) describes four types of alienation in the context of mid-19th century workers in Germany: alienation from product, from self, from fellows, and from species-being. He saw alienation as an essential element of life under capitalism, and its alleviation was contingent on the working class overthrowing the bourgeoisie and seizing the means of production. Alienation, for a young Marx, was inescapable as long as you worked in a capitalist system of production (Marx, 1932/2007; Rius, 1989; Silver, 2018). Marx and contemporaries like Feurbach followed in the tradition of the Hegelian dialectic–or history unfolding as a process of thesis and antithesis that eventually formed a synthesis of idea, which would then be challenged by an antithesis idea, and so on and so forth. Marx, who became fed up with the other Young Hegelians' theoretical debates, strayed from Hegel's idealism, instead embracing a materialist approach to political economy (Spencer & Krauze, 2002). However, at least at first, Marx did maintain Hegel's idealistic concept of essence– the idea that there is a "Species-being" within all of us which strives for the same experiences of freedom, creativity, and relationality through action in the world (Marx, 1932/2007). Later Marxist thinkers like Jaeggi (2014)

complicate this, drawing from agency-oriented concepts of selfhood: that is, humans do not have an essential essence, but instead the capacity for individual agency (p. 32-67). This is a more phenomenological approach borrowed from existentialism, and combined with the materialist and structural analyses, as you'll read soon, it produces more substantive results for our complex, pluralistic society.

How did Georg Simmel & The Frankfurt School understand alienation?

Georg Simmel (1900/1978) brought the concept of alienation into the realm of anti-positivism around the turn of the 20th century. He described alienation as "a growing separation between subject and object", and for him it was not always a negative thing (Auerbach, 2015, p. 1). For Simmel, alienating experiences often catalyze growth and integration if one could only creatively move through them. He was ultimately interested in individual creativity and its impact on alienating conditions, and named his four categories of alienation as *Effort*, *Means*, *Environment*, and *Creativity* (Simmel, 1900/1978 in Silver, 2018). Anti-positivism was a movement in the social sciences, which included thinkers such as Max Weber, toward understanding human beings from a pluralistic and subjective perspective that argues that studying social processes requires expansive methodological tools outside of the scientific method.

Simmel's work, along with Marxian sociologist-philosopher Georg Lukacs, went on to influence the infamous critical theorists of The Frankfurt School, who were active in Germany before and during World War II (Sims & Van Loon, 2012). Kalekin-Fishman and Langman (2015) highlight how one of the theorists of the Frankfurt school, Erich Fromm, "used psychoanalytic concepts to show that people who felt powerless in the face of their newly emergent freedom and their precarious position in a fragile economy were driven by unconscious

needs to assuage their alienation by embracing authoritarian leadership" (p. 4). It is easy to see how Fromm's conception of alienation still applies in today's political landscape–and today's music industry–and I was profoundly inspired reading his text *Escape from Freedom* in preparation for this research. Kalekin-Fishman and Langman (2015) continue on Fromm: "[he] saw the routinization of alienation as an outcome of repression 'in the context of industrial society where instrumentalism and separation become the substance of social relations.'... Fromm describes frustration and unhappiness as alienation from self, nature and others" (p. 4).

Silver (2018) places Marxian essentialism and critique of capitalist conditions in dialogue with Simmelian pluralism and emphasis on creative agency, which is referred to throughout the rest of the study as *dimensions of alienation:* Effort/Labor, Means/Capital, Environment/Fellows, and Creativity/Entrepreneurship. I invite the "/" to represent not conflict but dialogical cross-fertilization, drawn from Jaeggi's (2014) orienting principles, which build upon classical foundations with insight from a contemporary social philosophical perspective.

How do Jaeggi's orienting principles situate alienation in the present day?

Silver (2018) draws heavily from Jaeggi (2014) in his four dimensional alienation model. The following principles from Jaeggi's work situate alienation theory for our current multicultural society. While Marx and Simmel provided important foundations to our understanding of alienation, Jaeggi integrates contemporary critical theories and existentialism in order to consider pluralism and agency within experiences of alienation.

Formality. Jaeggi's first principle to orient alienation to our present context is the notion of formality. Formality is used, in this case, to refer to a formal theory of action in which action processes take various forms and emerge from conditions which may or may not be alienating. Silver (2018) remarks:

> Jaeggi (2014) argues that one of the major stumbling blocks of traditional alienation theory was its reliance on a substantive conception of human nature… [she] identifies a number of theoretical problems that this sort of essentialism produces, and points toward some solutions… [essentialism] assumes we know a priori what humans' genuine or ultimate needs are, such that certain social relationships may distort or thwart them. It also assumes a self with a transparent, unified, and self-sufficient inner life, which is then blocked from being realized by an external agency. Learning and growth through experiences and interchanges with the world and others become incomprehensible as anything other than inherently alienating, as do the complex multi-dimensional selves that characterize complex social orders […] drawing from Ernst Tugendhat… Jaeggi argues that alienation theory can overcome its essentialist impulses by building from a formal theory of action. 'How, not what' becomes the centerpiece (pp. 9).

Through Jaeggi's (2014) analysis, action theory becomes a formalizing structure to account for human agency in the discussion of alienation, which is particularly useful when exploring the experiences of working creative artists (Long & Barber, 2017; Rae, 2010). In this vein, we move from *what causes alienation?* to, *what formal conditions make unalienated action possible*? To do so, it involves "identifying not natural or essential goals or aims but rather certain ways of relating to one's actions, to oneself and the world" (Jaeggi, 2014, p. 10).

Multi-dimensionality. The present study moves beyond the traditional "logic of dichotomies" present in Hegelian and Marxian views of alienation: master and slave/thesis and antithesis, and bourgeoisie and proletariat/labor and capital, respectively. Through Jaeggi (2018), we understand alienation as a pluralistic process which "...resonates more with Simmel's overall orientation…" (Silver, 2018, p. 4). Additionally, Jaeggi recommends adding "Land," considered by Smith (1909) and Ricardo (2008) in texts preceding Marx to expand upon the labor-capital dichotomy.

Dialogical Cross-fertilization. In line with multi-dimensionality, Jaeggi (2018) complicates alienation further by entertaining a theoretical interaction between Marxian and Simmelian perspectives, as opposed to emphasizing one or the other as more correct or valid. This resists the dogmatic fixation on one theoretical framework, which limits where one can

observe alienation emerging from. Placing Marx in dialogue with Simmel illuminates alienations hiding in nooks and crannies, waiting to be liberated. Silver (2018) summarizes this dialogic relationship:

> Marx's great humanistic statement about the alienation of labor has provided the platform for the vast bulk of alienation theory, and any fresh theory of alienation can start here. Yet here, as in other cases (Levine, 1995), new theoretical vistas may be opened through placing classical theories into productive dialogue with one another. Georg Simmel's reflections on alienation, primarily in his *Philosophy of Money* but also in his later work, provide a valuable fund of ideas that may enrich the Marxian tradition. (p. 11)

Marx ties alienation to the social and historical capitalist moment, while Simmel considers it as inherent to the condition of being human. For Simmel, alienation is always possible, but never necessary: "for Marx producers either expropriate workers or they do not; for Simmel it is more ambiguous…" (p. 12).

From What to How.

> ...in the spirit of Jaeggi, Tugendhat, and Rae, we can convert Marxian alienation from what alienation consists of substantively (its essential content) to a theory of how alienation disturbs ways of relating to self and world (its form)[...] Marx's categories seem to be implicitly structured along these lines: workers become alienated from agentic objects, namely their own activity and that of other workers, but they also become alienated from non-agentic objects, namely their products and species-being […] Some component in an action process becomes inaccessible and alien, an impediment rather than a stimulus, and the loss of power to act is intertwined with an evacuation of meaning (Silver, 2018 p. 15).

Refer to Table 2 in Appendix B to identify the agentic and non agentic objects which may be alienated within the songwriting process.

The sections of this inquiry follow this movement from what to how as a way to illustrate the dynamic process of moving from essential content to formal relations in the present study. Before taking a look at the wheel of alienation and its application at the end of this section, there is one more concept that is vital to its comprehension: how alienating conditions arise in four different *relations of action* that impact the self in different ways.

How does self relate to the dimensions of alienation?

Silver (2018), following Jaeggi (2014), understands the potential for alienation within four distinct relations of action, namely: self-self, self-others, self-artifacts, self-environment. When self forms "a relation of relationlessness" (p. 1) with each social dimension, differing implications result.

Self - Self. When self is alienated from self, it becomes rigid, and feels like "me but not me"… which leads to reification. "The self's breakdown of creativity is the incapacity to continually transform and reconstruct…" (Silver, 2018, p. 4).

Self - Others. When self is alienated from others, "there is a lost desire for recognition, and they feel like they become tools for others…" (p. 4)

Self - Artifacts. When self is alienated from artifacts, it feels as though it "has lost touch with them as extensions and enhancements of its capacities to act beyond itself in the world… [artifacts] become impediments and frustrations…" (p. 4).

Self - Environment. "When self is alienated from its environment, they do not experience it as a world that sustains growth and creativity etc., instead it breeds indifference" (p. 4).

How might the dimensions of alienation apply to the songwriting system?

Now that I have defined all the terms for Silver's wheel of alienation, please view it on page 41. The wheel offers a conceptual model for applying the aforementioned dimensions of alienation to relations of action, which will be defined below. The outer ring features the relations of action–self-self, self-others, self-artifacts, self-environment, and the two inner rings feature the dimensions of alienation. By turning the rings around, one explores different combinations of dimensions becoming alienated from relations, actions, from one another, and

vice versa. The ring produces alienation theories like the following: *alienation of effort from the means of action in the relation of self-self*. In this particular alienated relation, an individual doesn't have access to the safety/space/resources/education/etc. necessary to do self work or what might be called "personal development." For example, this could be the alienation experienced by a young working class songwriter who excels at their craft, but struggles with the social aspects of artist networking and self-promotion due to incessant low self-esteem. This songwriter's family does not discuss mental health in affirming ways, so they internalize not needing help even if they know it will help their songwriting career. There are several other combinations to explore when moving the rings around. In order to rein in the conceptual breadth of the wheel alienation, as well as make it directly apply to the songwriting system, I have put together a table–appearing in Appendix B–that synthesizes the *wheel of alienation* (Silver, 2018) with the systems theory of songwriting creativity discussed earlier (McIntyre, 2008).

The table in Appendix B is my whittled-down version of the wheel of alienation applied to the songwriting system; it is the chosen framework for identifying alienation experiences within participants' narratives. In my analysis of the interviews, experiences of alienation and integration will be framed as interactions between agentic objects (agency) and non-agentic objects (structure) and the subsequent alienation or integration that results from the dynamic. In analytic practice, each cell of the table can become alienated from any other cell, or removed altogether depending on the context, so alienation can be identified within the songwriting system from a multitude of dynamic perspectives. The shared "agency/structure dynamics" that are salient across interviews will be expressed as themes and sub-themes in the study's findings.

Figure 1

From Silver (2018): The Wheel of Alienation on the level of general action theory (first, below) and in the sphere of production (second, below).

FIGURE 1 The Wheel of Alienation (I): The Level of General Action Theory

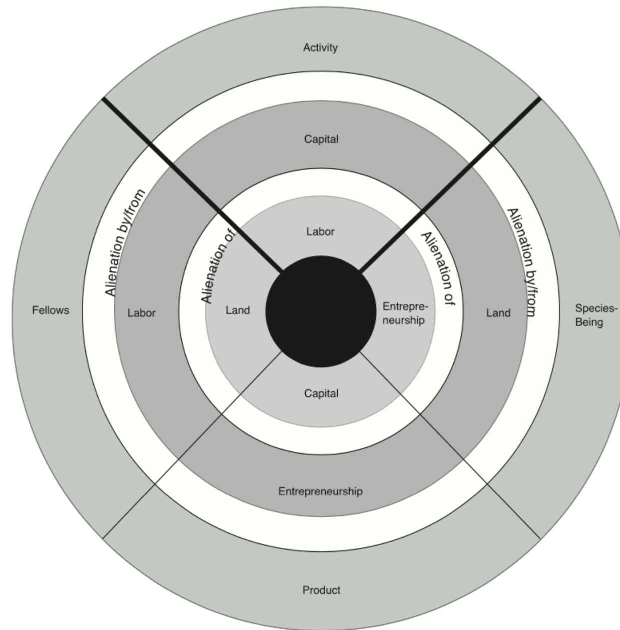

FIGURE 2 The Wheel of Alienation (II): The Sphere of Production

What research actions did I take?

Akin to the engineers who planned the construction of the first skyscrapers in the late eighteenth and early twentieth centuries, the first step to taking research action is building as much scaffolding as possible for the action to occur. I've learned that in the research process, slowing down and observing where you are and where you're going– inspecting the scaffolding's integrity–is vital to the coherence and manageability of the study. I've spent time meditating and reflecting on my research questions in every stage of the process, as a kind of compass to orient myself. At this point, I invite you to step back and observe the scaffolding I've built through self-reflection and the literature review to explicitly observe the frameworks upon which the data gathering and analysis will be built. As we slow our breath and our bodies down, it's revealed that the frameworks that are scaffolding my questions are subjectivism/critical theory, narrative research, and ultimately their synthesis in what I'm calling "critical narrative inquiry."

What knowledge frameworks scaffold this research?

> Whether we are aware of it or not, we always bring certain beliefs and philosophical assumptions to our research. Sometimes these are deeply ingrained views about the types of problems that we need to study, what research questions to ask, or how we go about gathering data. These beliefs are instilled in us during our educational training, through journal articles and books, through advice dispensed by our advisors, and through the scholarly communities we engage at our conferences and scholarly meetings (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 47).

What is a "critical narrative inquiry" and what sets it apart from other kinds of research? Critical narrative inquiry is a term I chose to name the synthesis of narrative inquiry (Kim, 2016; Polkinghorne, 1988) and critical theory research (Matney, 2019). There are certainly overlaps, as narrative inquiry is often associated with criticism of grand narratives and power structures, via the influence of poststructural thinkers like Michel Foucault. The addition of "critical" was to emphasize the influence of the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory and other Marxian traditions such as the work of Cedric Robinson (1989/2021) in his book *Black Marxism*, which uplifts the

non-dominant narrative of the Black radical tradition in rich socio-historical detail. Throughout this research process, the culturally-critical mindset that I developed during my graduate program expanded into sociological perspectives that emphasize material conditions, liberation praxis, and radical forms of deconstructing neoliberal cis-heteropatriarchal racial capitalism.

How does subjectivism & critical theory scaffold this study?

As opposed to objectivist research which believes that truth can be derived objectively through observation of the material world, Matney (2019) notes that subjectivism:

> [...] asserts that only human beings can create truth and meaning; humans then impose that meaning onto objects (Crotty, 1998, p. 9). Truth and meaning can be imported from anything other than objects, including but not limited to psychoanalytic, cultural, religious, or linguistic frames (Crotty, 1998, pp. 9, 152). General subjectivist research will therefore emphasize subjects' specific or collective meanings (Crotty, 1998, p. 9). Critically oriented subjectivist research may challenge power relations, the idea of objectivity, and current socio-cultural practices (Crotty, 1998, p. 157; Sajnani, Marxen, & Zarate, 2017). Subjectivist research can inform future theory, research, and practice by highlighting individual, social, and cultural matters (Baker & Young, 2016). Subjectivist music therapy research emphasizes the generation of meaning by individuals or groups, either about music, health, or the music therapy process (p. 16-17).

Critical theories–namely gender and race–have informed current political discourse, often in important but unarticulated ways. The philosophical assumptions of the present study are primarily influenced by critical theory. Creswell and Poth (2018) expound upon the goals of critical theory research:

> *Critical theory* perspectives are concerned with empowering human beings to transcend the constraints placed on them by race, class, and gender (Fay, 1987). Researchers need to acknowledge their own power, engage in dialogues, and use theory to interpret or illuminate social action (Madison, 2011). Central themes that a critical researcher might explore include the scientific study of social institutions and their transformations through interpreting the meanings of social life; the historical problems of domination, alienation, and social struggles; and a critique of society and the envisioning of new possibilities" (p. 98).

How does narrative research scaffold this study?

Kim (2016) writes extensively on critical theory's influence on narrative inquiry as a methodology, naming it as:

> A socio-cultural and political theory [which] examines relationships of domination and subordination that create social inequality in society, focusing on notions of distribution, production, and reproduction… Scholars understand critical theory as a method of understanding forms of power and domination. However, the premise of critical theory is its moral imperative and its emphasis on the need for both individual empowerment and social transformation. That is, it emphasizes the need to develop critical consciousness in people as well as the need to change society (p. 36).

I aim to apply a critical examination of "the told" within "the telling." In other words, the participants' lived experiences are contextualized as a temporal and dynamic relationship between agent and structure, understood chronologically as a complex series of choices and action/inaction that lead to certain conditions. Given the chronological narrative, derived from the participants' tellings of their experiences of distinct temporal points in their songwriting journeys, I present the re-told chronology of lived experience through a structural, critical, and Marxian-Simmelian lens. That is to say, the experiences as the participants shared them are intact, but I am presenting them in a way that highlights the struggle between agency and structure over time, which in my opinion finds theoretical basis in the term alienation (Polkinghorne, 1988, Rae, 2010).

In terms of analysis, similar to the dialogic fertilization between Marx and Simmel, I aim to analyze the data as a dialogic cross-fertilization between agency/structure and non-dominant narratives/dominant narratives, which accounts for a critical analysis of alienation processes as well as the ways in which action is influenced by dominant narratives. From a narrative perspective, creative agents can construct non-dominant narratives as a way of overcoming the agency/structure dichotomy through re-storying the self. Similar to how Simmel's theories

supplement the structural dichotomy of labor and capital with subjective creative agency, the constellating nature of the narrative metaphor–and its ability to elicit life-affirming narratives amongst a complex web of cultural and experiential stories– brings both depth and coherence to the agency/structure struggles present in participants' lived experiences.

What action steps did I follow?

Before involving other songwriters in this study, I felt compelled to know myself as much as possible: to recognize and address any cultural and social biases that might distort the narratives of participants. So, I underwent a self-reflexivity pre-research period of unmasking my own internalized narratives as a songwriter: I journaled about my songs and their impact on my actions over the years, I mind-mapped how my cultural situatedness informed my creative decisions, and I had an honest dialogue with myself about why I often felt like an "alien among men" in my experiences with songwriting. Some of those stories were alluded to in the first section of this paper, and they'll be mentioned again later alongside the participants' narratives.

How were participants recruited?

The participant recruitment process was as follows: First, I emailed an invitation to colleagues who know or have connections to practicing songwriters, asking them to forward it to their network and attaching the recruitment invitation to the email. Next, I posted the recruitment invitation to my Facebook and Twitter accounts. Then, interested participants were prompted to follow a link to an online interest form via Google Forms where they reviewed eligibility criteria and completed demographic prompts. After that, I reviewed invitation responses to screen for inclusion criteria, which was that participants must be over 18, have received monetary income from songwriting at some point, and consider songwriting to be a significant aspect of their life or facet of their identity. I offered to interview two respondents who both declined due to lack of

time, and another individual decided to decline after experiencing a death in the family. My goal for the number of participants was 2-6, and I ended up settling with four as a manageable middle ground. Preference was given to self-identified working class songwriters, however this was not an exclusion criteria as two of the four chosen participants self-identified as working class, one as middle class, and one chose not to answer. Finally, I emailed selected participants a consent form, and answered any questions participants had about the study, and once participants returned signed consent forms, interviews were scheduled.

The consent process for the study incorporated the following steps. Once selected by me as a potential participant, designated parties received a digital copy of the consent form via email. I answered all pertinent questions and coordinated information with the primary investigator or IRB board as needed. Participants read and signed the consent form which outlines the study purpose, data collection method, and other pertinent information. Finally, upon receiving digital, signed copies from participants, I kept a copy for their records and emailed a copy to participants.

How were interviews conducted?

Rosenthal (1993) stated that "The purpose of the interview in narrative inquiry is to let stories be told, particularly the stories of those who might have been marginalized or alienated from the mainstream, and those whose valuable insights and reflections would not otherwise come to the light" (cited in Kim, 2016, p. 166). Furthermore, they stated that "Life story interview… is the most common narrative interview we use, and it is based on the concept of one's life story being a social construct comprising both of social reality and a personal, experiential world" (Rosenthal, 1993, cited in Kim, 2016, p. 166).

The present study's interview protocol consisted of the following steps. First, I met with each participant individually via zoom for 30 to 60 minutes. I conducted a semi-structured interview based on a set of predetermined questions (see Appendix A). Then, I varied questions depending on the participant's specific songwriting practices, offering opportunities for them to share their experiences with songwriting, alienation, and transformation. I thanked participants for their time and asked for final questions or comments, then offered an additional optional meeting to review and verify my interpretation of the interview.

How did I analyze the data?

Kim (2016) refers to data analysis in Narrative Inquiry as "flirting with the data." The term *flirting* "[draws from] Freud's notion of free-floating attention, or free association, which is the psychic act of detaching one's devotion to one's internal sensors [...] the idea of flirtation asks us to undo our commitment to what we already know and question its legitimacy. Thus flirtation is considered an "unconscious form of skepticism." (p. 187)

I used transcription software, otter.ai, to transcribe audio recordings of each interview. Then, I reviewed the transcriptions for accuracy, adding notable pauses or gestures. Next, I read each transcription to identify key statements and code the transcript for relevant themes that may emerge, determining how they fit in with the larger narrative. After that, I used software Atlas.ti to organize codes into themes from across interviews in a cross-case analysis to gain insight into the stories and experiences shared by the participants. These themes were analyzed and discussed in comparison to relevant findings in existing literature.

To reconstruct the "told" from the "telling" (Polkinghorne, 1988), I rearranged participants' *told* experiences to follow a narrative trajectory in the present study's *telling*. That is, participant's experiences are arranged in terms of the beginning, middle, and present moment

of their songwriting journeys, utilizing three "temporal levels" as frames for understanding when certain agency/structure dynamics emerged as salient in their narratives. I drew from Kim (2016) for understanding narrative coding: "four basic elements: codes, categories, patterns, and themes…each stage involves much deliberation and recursion" (p. 188). In line with Spence (1986), I engaged in narrative smoothing. Narrative smoothing "can be used to mark out subjective interpretation as explanation, and to present a 'good' story that is not necessarily a 'faithful' account…it is like brushing off the edges of disconnected raw data" (Kim, 2016, p. 192). Through a process of reconstructing the told in the telling, narrative smoothing and narrative coding, the lived experiences of the participants are storied as to highlight non-dominant and dominant narratives and their various attitudes, responses, and actions toward them.

What did I learn?

Now that I have reviewed the literature and laid out the steps I followed to complete this research, I move into a summary of the findings. What salient experiences were alienating or transformative for the participants? How did they engage with the field and the domain? What can we learn about songwriting and the music industry from these stories? To begin to answer these questions, I will start by introducing the participants, who have been given pseudonyms to conceal their identities.

Meet the participants: What is songwriting to them?

The four participants will be referred to as Heather, Teresa, Sam, and Brian. To maintain confidentiality I won't reveal many identifiers, but for the purposes of social critique I find it helpful to share the following information: Heather is a white woman based in California and works generally in the field of folk music. Teresa is a Black afro-indigenous woman based in Pennsylvania and works in the field of Black diaspora/R&B music. Brian is a white man based in Texas and works generally in the field of folk music. Finally, Sam is a white man based in Pennsylvania and works in the field of folk music and poetry.

For songwriters, at least those who engage with songwriting as a source of income, what they create can hold monetary value. This was one of the qualifiers for participation in this study–to have received monetary income from songwriting–because understanding material value is vital to comprehending experiences of alienation in the Marxian-Simmelian sense. As Brian–who at time of interview is in his 50s– mentions in this passage, there appears to be a journey from saying "yes" to everything that provides a modicum of income (which might be associated with a "lack mindset" and/or simply existing as a young person within a capitalist

system of production), to embodying a more habituated sense of what is acceptable and beneficial in terms of compensation:

I have built a career over a long period of time that has several facets that are not all live performance. And so I have mailbox money coming in. And other things. So I don't have to say yes to everything. I think if you're younger, and you're starting out and you're offered a gig, I think you feel like you have to say yes. I mean, I know I did. And so it's a really empowering thing, when you get to the point where you go, it's not just that I'm too big, or that I'm famous… it's that you just decide, oh, I don't want to play this gig because the deal is not right. It's a smoky bar, or the time slot that they're giving me isn't what I want, you just say no. I remember, like that line in the sand for me was saying, "No, I don't want to play at midnight on a Tuesday because that doesn't benefit me or you–like it's not helping the venue."

Sam expressed the potential for financial compensation as motivation to "hustle" earlier in life:

I was led to believe through some external validation from hit writers for artists like Faith Hill, Blake Shelton, Kenny Chesney, Shania Twain… I had some very good validation from that segment of the industry and those people who were peripheral to them. So I was invited to Nashville to sit in on some sessions. I was co-writing, I was playing for publishers, I was playing for labels, I was, you know, really hustling; co-writing with people who were co-writing with people who were getting major, major cuts. And so as a family, we decided, yeah, that would be something we would devote resources to, maybe we could pay off our mortgage, maybe this could be like, an income for us.

While financial issues and motivations showed up in every interview, money was far from the interviewee's only reason for writing songs. Across the participants, songwriting was described as a spiritual practice, a mysterious process, and as a process of emotional processing and grieving.

Songwriting is a spiritual practice

For Teresa, songwriting-as-sacred came up when asked about her experiences with songwriting collaborations:

It's a very sacred practice for me… it's like that recipe book your grandma passes down. You don't just give that to everybody. I don't like songwriting with everybody. Like you don't share your recipes with everybody because it's very personal to you.

Sam referred to the spiritual nature of his practice while defining how he personally identified with songwriting:

> I guess you could call it a hobby. You know, but it seems much more than that. I think it's like a spiritual practice…I see it more as a vocation, instead of an occupation. So as a songwriter, it's a vocation. It's something that's like…I'm here. Like, that's why I'm here.

Songwriting is a mysterious process

Brian spoke to the mysterious nature of the songwriting process, and how the ephemeral quality is largely what he enjoys about it:

> The longer I can let it go directionless, the happier I am. So, kind of allowing my subconscious to do the heavy lifting, and not really dial in to what the theme is. It's usually about halfway through that my brain forces me to start taking control. A perfect song would be I get to the end, it's finished, I have no idea what it means. I go and record it, put it out, and then years later, I go 'oh, that's what that means'. I always describe it as… I write "sideways". I feel like I'm trying to write just out of my peripheral vision, so that I'm tricking myself into maybe discovering something about myself or about the world or, you know, I don't want to know the answer to the question. The hopeful ideal of a song for me is that you find out something about yourself that maybe you didn't know, because your brain had hidden it from you.

Similarly, Sam goes on to describes his experience with the mystery of the songwriting process:

> There are songs that I don't understand the meaning of until years later. I'm a lot more careful about what I write now. Because that shit comes true. I guess I'm kind of witchy. I feel this haunted sense of some of my songs. Like, I imagine scenarios in my song, and then I write them. And then they come true, like, 5 or 10 years later, and I see it and I'm like, "wow, that song really nailed what I'm going through now. I wonder how much the song had to do with that?" Because they were not related at all to what I was going through when I wrote it, but then I went through the thing.

Songwriting facilitates processing and grieving life experiences

Heather found her stride with songwriting after battling cancer, which at first made it difficult to write songs, but eventually broke through into both personal and communal transformation:

> I think it is transformative when you're sharing a song that comes from the heart, but it's about a real, real tough life situation. And when other people can feel a connection from that, and

a release, because they're not alone, and the appreciation of all the good stuff that came out of that. That feels transformative to me, but then, really for them. Like, maybe they're just an audience member [and] did not expect to be thinking about their mom who had cancer. And isn't that a difficult subject to think about? Nobody wants to talk about that. But oh, my God, thank you for bringing it up in a way that feels safe. And now "Oh, I'm not alone. Oh, my God, what a relief!" Your shoulders just relax and then feeling love, you know, just feeling love is the end result.

Teresa spoke to the transformative nature of songwriting in terms of processing grief and letting go of old experiences and mindsets:

The personal transformation was just me coming out with a mixtape and it was really bearing a lot of things that were harmful at the time, like I had gone through a dark night of the soul, people would call it, and I still was going through it. It was just helping me to push past it–like dealing with the grief of loss, relationships and toxic situations with people, and just decisions made off of scarcity and self loathing and stuff. It just helped me face a lot of those things. So as I performed it, I would hear it and it was like, Oh, I'm still going through this. It was kind of like a cast resetting and helping me get my structure together–with a mirror on it. So [there was] a lot of reflection and a lot of reconstruction and rehabilitation from doing that project that helped me personally be a stronger person.

Sam, who studied poetry as an undergraduate before moving into songwriting, described how his insistence on writing vulnerably helped him to process a traumatic experience from much earlier in life:

One of my poetry professors said, "write from the most vulnerable place, the most sensitive place" [...] Recently on my last album, there's a song called, I think it's called [redacted], or something like that. I kind of wrote my way back into a memory that didn't surface until later in my life, of being molested as a five or six year old, by like, neighborhood kids. I was pre-verbal at the time. And like, I have these really vivid memories of color and taste and like all these things, so that was an important song. It was one of the most vulnerable places I've ever written from and published.

Sam's process of recounting this experience from early childhood occurs on several temporal levels: the experience itself (far in the past), the experience of writing about it in a song (more recent), and then telling me about the experience and song within the interview (present habitus). Being that narrative researchers seek to understand how meaning is constructed over time (Kim, 2016), the temporal order of experience is significant. Subsequently, moving forward

I will present the participants' narratives in temporal order using a three-level construction. Using my own songwriting career as an example of the chronological progression from early songwriting life (level I), mid-career (level II), and current day (level III), I offer a framework for reconstructing "the told in the telling" (Polkinghorne, 1988). To be clear, I don't consider my narrative to be part of the data. Instead, I see it as a framing device for the reader to experience participants' narratives through the subjective lens of the author. To maintain coherence within the framework of subjectivism, I am presenting the meaning that I created out of the data–emerging from my own agentic meaning-making capacity–not an "objective report" on what was said.

Three temporal levels of growth & integration

In alignment with my critical narrative methodology, I will now lay out a three-level timeline to place participants' experiences in temporal context—i.e., far in the past (level I), the more recent past (level II), and the present state of experience (level III). A chronological structure allows me to observe actions and outcomes over time and note what is maintained through all stages—for instance, a particular way of writing songs or a reason for writing songs—and what gets "left behind"—or disintegrated—such as attitudes toward self, others, and the music industry, and how creative and relational choices adapt to changing conditions over time.

Level I - Exploring songwriting (or early in career)

Level I is the participants' background and foundational life experiences before knowing themselves as songwriters. However, because some participants didn't explain their pre-songwriting life, for them this is simply the earliest memory of their songwriting journey described in the interview. For me, my "level I" lasted until around sophomore/junior year of undergrad, age 19/20. I would consider my step into level II when I decided to pursue a

Music/Voice major, instead of focusing on education or therapy, at the beginning of sophomore year. In level I, I enjoyed songwriting and was trying to find my place in it, and in level II I began to think about it as a career and something that I was seriously pursuing as a primary life project.

Level II - Embracing songwriting practice and songwriter identity

At level II, a shift has occurred and the desire to know oneself as a songwriter and improve one's songwriting becomes ever-present. The songwriter starts to encounter struggles associated with "the industry" and starts to see songwriting as a potential source for both personal and social transformation and monetary income. For me, this was epitomized in 2015 when I released my first solo EP and subsequently gigged around the city in an attempt "to get my name out there." A heavy focus on promotion, professional legitimacy, and trying to get recognized by anyone who might allow your songs into the domain is characteristic of level II.

Level III - Embodying songwriting practice in the present day

Level III epitomizes how the songwriters understand and narrate their current songwriting habitus. As opposed to looking back on "who I was then," this is the stage in which they currently reside, including the alienating conditions and challenges they have yet to move through. In my experience, this is who I am now: a board-certified music therapist, budding social researcher, employee of the University of Pittsburgh, and active student of action research and public policy. I am emerging back into songwriting and performing again, and subsequently moving through the fear of what that feels like as a less dissociated and more embodied human. I am an artist-clinician-scholar who has integrated several skill sets over my lifetime.

Agency/structure dynamics through the levels

While a multitude of experiences were expressed during the interviews, four fields of action emerged as salient which are relevant to my research questions. As mentioned at the end of the literature on alienation, I utilized the table in Appendix B to identify alienation, transformation, and communal experiences that emerged in the interviews as interaction between agency (actions of agentic objects) and structure (non-agentic systems within and through which action occurs) within the songwriting system. First, ***interaction with normative expectations and values*** emerged as relevant to the experience of being a songwriter. Songwriters are constantly made aware of the norms around not only what their audience considers "good" music, but also the norms set by the music industry–or at least by the way the media portrays the music industry–and then the choice becomes to cater to the norms to queer the norms, or more realistically, to actively balance catering and queering. This agency/structure dynamic is where we observe the influence of grand narratives on the creative decision-making process. Second, ***agentic actions*** emerged throughout participant narratives which expressed their capacity for growth and integration: making choices out of their own interest as opposed to what they're "supposed to do," or pressured into by specific others or grand narratives. Agentic action is a willful step away from alienated conditions; it is taking action toward a more embodied non-dominant narrative and away from defining self via grand narratives. Third, ***alienation experiences*** emerged in which they experienced a felt sense of cut-off from themselves, others, their songs, or their means of producing songs. Here is where the more traditional Marxian understanding of alienation is revealed within the agency/structure struggle. You'll notice that while some of these struggles were overcome through growth and integration, others continue to manifest in different ways. Finally, ***communal experiences*** emerged throughout the data,

highlighting the ways in which the community supported shared values, authentic actions, and the overcoming of–and at times contribution to–alienated conditions for the songwriter.

For each of these fields of action I aim to highlight the diversity of experiences, not necessarily the ones that occurred most. The goal is to highlight how subjective experiences of agency, alienation, and community show up differently depending on the songwriter and the context.

What experiences emerged in level I?

In interviews with participants, I didn't ask any questions that explicitly dug into their origins and past, which is likely why this level was least-discussed by the participants. The following reflections on the origins of their songwriting practice–or early stages in their career or life–emerged organically within their reflections on their present practice.

Interaction with normative expectations, level I. Speaking from experience, there are many social norms which discourage people of any age from writing their own music– from the "romantic genius" archetype debunked in McIntyre, to the normative story that creative individuals are somehow born with innate talent: so consequently, if you struggle at first you're probably just not born to be an artist. Or, my personal favorite, "don't quit your day job!" in response to a "bad" musical performance—I was told this by family members when I first started singing. For the purposes of sharing how these norms show up in the early stages of interest in songwriting, I will identify *music industry myths that reproduce discouragement* in the participants' narratives. Teresa reflected on butting up against normative expectations communicated to her through her family:

> I also was a closeted artist early on. Like, people knew I was artsy, like they knew I was. I drew all the time. And I would write songs all the time. They knew I would, like, dabble. But they didn't know that's what I wanted to do as a career. I was definitely afraid to tell them –my friends and family– because I didn't trust them to support me. Honest, I love y'all, but I didn't

trust you. I didn't trust them to support me. Because when, you know, you do like a test thing. Like you just want to test the waters. So I'm like, "I've always wanted to be a singer." You know, they're like, it's either neutral, or they're like, "that's too much work," and "that's one in a million chance." And then they just throw fear at you because they feel like *they* can't do it.

In another interview, Brian describes an online interaction with a young musician who recently received a "big break" and began playing in front of enormous audiences on tour, revealing in the data some of the possible social influences on the death of members of the "27 club":

If you go in thinking that there are rules to how you're supposed to do it, as an independent musician, I think you're going to end up being disappointed or you're going to feel like you're doing it wrong… I saw somebody posted on Twitter the other day that has a huge opening slot. They're like, playing in front of hundreds of thousands of people you know, every month, and again, not to take away from their experience, but they posted to basically say, you know, I was gone for 30 days, I came home for one day, did my laundry, hugged my cat, and then went back out on the road for this other, you know, two weeks, again, of gigs that many people would kill for. And this person then said, "I can see why Kurt Cobain did what he did."

Agentic action, level I. One thing that makes songwriting–or any art for that matter– so exciting when people start to explore it is the *discovery of creative agency*. Having a sense of control over how you write and what you write can be both liberating and transformative, and it often starts with finding a process that feels embodied for you. For Teresa, she found her process early on:

I stick to melody first and then I input lyrics or sometimes they'll just magically happen at the same time. So I'll have a melody, and lyrics are coming with it. I think it's just because I've been practicing that since I was a child and it's been my go to for as long as I can remember because that's how long I've been songwriting.

Sam has shifted from a compartmentalized, piece-by-piece process in his earlier records, to a collaborative and here-and-now approach. His journey through approaches shows that creative agency can start one way and expand out into other approaches as knowledge of the field and domain expands:

> The first two records I made were kind of like building a ship in a bottle. So there were a lot of little …"we're going to track this one guitar part," you know, and then I would do that. And then I would leave and I come back to the studio and do another one and like, just like layering things on like that. But this most recent record that I did this winter was like four guys in a room, everything miked and we would just run the songs and choose the takes right then in there, listen back, and then move to the next song. And no click track for the last record, which was a departure for me. And leaving in some of the little things that might be considered 'mistakes' when you're making a polished studio record for commercial release.

Returning to Teresa, she also described the song which influenced her to move toward the next stage of taking songwriting more seriously and writing songs from a more authentic place. In this passage she also identified a social norm that appeared to be holding her back from embracing a life of artistry:

> I got a beat from a friend. And I wrote a song that was really channeling me feeling like I'm not doing what I'm supposed to do. I'm working this nine-to-five, and I come home, and then I eat and then I go to sleep, and I go to nine-to-five, and I come home, and I just felt like I was going against myself, because I knew I was supposed to be an artist. And in society, they make it like being an artist, you can't have a career in that unless you're Beyonce. Like, that's not true. And I don't want people to think that that is how it should be. So I wrote a song … and it was kind of like me talking to myself, and that opened the floodgates of me having more vulnerable, honest songs about how I'm feeling versus just being clever and witty, and punchlines and metaphors and all that.

Alienation experiences, level I. In terms of alienating experiences early in the process of becoming a songwriter, there are discomforting moments of *facing the reality of imperfection*, both in the self as well as the reality of working in the industry. I would describe these as "rude awakenings" which may cause the individual to feel alienated from the idealized identity and sense of the world that they held previously. After catching what you might call a "big break" early in her career, Heather not only experienced the rude awakening of what international touring is really like, and on top of that dealt with resentment and jealousy from fellow musicians:

> I landed in an opportunity where I got kind of brought into a band with a famous musician, so I got to be on these tours on a tour bus and around the world and traveling to amazing cities and getting to eat all this exciting food and see all these amazing things, and play music in front of people who want to be there who paid a ticket, who are excited to hear you.

And I've had the opportunity, on top of that, to open at some of those shows. So I've noticed, I think of one friend in particular, I just feel there's jealousy, sometimes between other friends, because we're all working so hard at this… And I don't know, she hasn't told me that she's jealous, but I feel it, I feel resentment…I imagine that she's saying, 'we're working so hard, and you get all this stuff and you take it for granted,' …What I mean by take it for granted is if I'm complaining about an aspect of this tour life like oh, God, you know… you have no alone time, and you're constantly with ten other people coordinating every moment of your day, your outfit, you have to discuss with everybody. There's just so much stuff that is just annoying. And so if I were to talk about that, you know, that might bother certain people: like, "why are you complaining? You're getting paid to make music at this high level."

Teresa participated in a community-based program which supported young artists in her hometown, and through mentorship was quickly revealed truth both in herself and about what it takes to be working artist:

...it was the first time I heard my voice, and I hated it. And I cried, and I was like, I'm never doing music again! But it helped me get better technique and to work my inner ear. So in that we had to learn from people–there were people that came in from like Motown and stuff. It was really cool. And they taught us the organic marketing, like the flyers, street teams, and stuff like that. And then the business marketing with ads and papers, magazines, press releases. So we were taught that while we were very young, like teenagers, and stuff like that, so that's really when I was like, "oh, okay, I'm seeing the whole system of how this works behind artists that basically is a company at this point." And I saw it, it burst my dream bubble of like, getting discovered at the mall.

What experiences emerged in level II?

While level II may seem difficult to distinguish from level I, as they both are describing past events and actions, I recommend thinking about this level as the "working stage" of the life of a songwriter–or where the majority of the conflict and struggle occur between the individual and their social field that either supports or hinders creative production. At this level, a commitment to songwriting as a practice has been made, and a subsequent struggle ensues in navigating the realities of institutional and communal fields. Where in the level I songwriters encounter the surface-level norms of what it means to first become a songwriter, in level II there is more direct interaction, compromise, and conflict between the songwriter and the normative culture of the domain.

Interaction with normative expectations, level II. I am referring to interaction with normative expectations in level II as ***self in relationship with normative values***. At level II, an intentional relationship is formed between the field and its values and the individual and their values. This relationship is part of a system that includes the songwriting field, cultural factors outside of the songwriting field, as well as intrapersonal factors, i.e., whether or not the norms and values encountered in level I were internalized or not (McIntyre, 2008). Sam, who also works as a teacher, encounters normative expectations when students come across his music:

> I've been a teacher for 20 years, and sometimes kids find my music. They play it and put it on their playlists, and they blast it in their cars leaving the parking lot. So that's like, the soundtrack to their senior year or whatever, or part of the soundtrack. And you know, I think people are, like, kind of amazed. Because they're like, "I had no idea! why aren't you on American Idol or something?" You know, "why aren't you famous?" And like, I think that's a question that a lot of people ask because they just have this very mythologized view of the record industry.

Heather discussed how in the area of artist marketing and self-promotion, it feels impossible to keep up with the normative standard of what is "enough" promotion:

> I think [promotion and marketing] have the potential to take up almost more time than the music itself. It's a constant. It feels like it is constantly available. And constantly a good thing. Like it would have potentially good results towards furthering your music presence in the world by networking and working on marketing and that whole side of things. It does feel like it helps in the long run, but it's daunting and annoying and frustrating how all-consuming it is and how endless it is and how it feels like you're never quite doing everything you should. And then once you figure it out, there's a new platform or it's a new interface, or it's a new schedule. So it's a big part of the brain space.

Brian spoke not only to confronting normative standards, but also the agency found in the word "no" when discussing promotional outlets:

> I think a lot of singer-songwriters I know get told by their management, like, "Oh, you got to do Tik Tok," or "you've got to do Snapchat," or you *got* to do these things. And I think sometimes it's okay for the answer to be "No, I don't."

This experience overlaps with the following section, as rejecting normative expectations by saying "no" is also an example of agentic action.

Agentic action, level II. One of the ways participants accessed willful value-driven action in the midpoint of their career as a songwriter was by *expressing authenticity through songs*. Engagement in both solo and collaborative songwriting provided them with processes that move beyond "self-expression"–a beginner music therapist's favorite clinical goal–into the act of self-creation. This occurs between parts of self, musical collaborators, as well as between artist and listener, as seen in the way Heather and her audience connect through the authentic sharing of raw experience:

> That was very hard at first to bridge the gap with writing and going through cancer. At first I didn't want to pick up the guitar at all. And that was a really interesting journey. But later, when I did start to write those songs, you know, the cancer songs, I knew it was cathartic and important for my healing. I wanted to share the things I have learned, and also let people know they're not alone. Like bearing witness to the experience–having gone through cancer–it really informed my songwriting process and my career, my relationship to the muse, and like inner, outer, the antenna. And for authenticity, that's kind of my starting place now. I have a real authentic story to share. And I, I guess it gave me a feeling of a safe legitimized space to share an authentic story. So now I have a sense of what that feels like.

Sam described how authentic expression was imperative to his success in Nashville, remarking that it was the only way to procure the attention of members of the field who mediate whether or not songs will be accepted into the domain:

> But that was how you did it, you wrote the songs that you needed to write, and you sang the songs that your whole body needed to sing. And those were the ones that people were interested in recording, not the ones that you had written for someone else's body, but the ones from your own body, not the ones for someone else's experience, but for your own experience. And so writing from a place of authenticity became paramount.

Alienation experiences, level II. The salient alienation experiences in level II were a sense of *split identity* and *alienation from family*, which in Teresa's case involved both:

> When I went to college, it was a music school. So it was much easier to be myself there. I had people that were all in some form of music and art and stuff like that. And it seems like from there, things shifted. I was able to make friends that were more in the realm of creativity, and my family just after time, and after I accomplished things, like consistently. And honestly, when I made it on [the local newspaper], I think that's when my family was like, 'Oh, she's really, oh, she's in [the local newspaper] again…Okay, this is what she does.' That was very– it was very

difficult. I don't hold it against people. It's just more so like, I had to learn not to blame or feel bitter about it, because I saw other people that have families that supported them in their music, or will go to their shows and stuff, and it wasn't happening for me. But then I'm like, It's fine. It's not that big of a deal. Sometimes people just don't want to see. It's kind of like secondhand embarrassment. Like, you don't want to see somebody you care about to pursue something, and then you might have an assumption of who they are as a person. There was a whole bunch of stuff that was probably layered on that, but oh, yeah, now. I get support. So that's cool. But it was tough. It was very tough. I felt like I was split into two different people. And I couldn't just be myself.

Sam "had kids young,", in his words, and maintained a family during his big push for pursuing songwriting professionally:

So yeah, I was gone. I was working two jobs. I was working as a writer, on spec, trying to get cuts and trying to get holds put on songs. I was trying to get a single on a major release that would be played and toured by a major artist […] I work. I come home. I drive to the studio. So when I said when I shifted from traveling to New York, LA, Nashville, and just focused on locally, like, what am I doing, what records am I making? And then I still use the real estate of time that I had taken, and I had missed–I've missed a lot of my children's life. Actually, my children are grown, and they're all like, '"you weren't a bad dad, you just weren't around a lot."' So yeah, I think I've been coping with some of that, because I don't really have a strong connection with my own children.

Communal experiences, level II. As the songwriter engages with a field, they inevitably start to engage with the community of musicians and audience members within it. One of the ways participants experienced this initially was *connection with community*. Heather expressed how a mutual connection to the work among musicians seems to drive the creative system:

I love and feel so fired up about making music because of the thrill of getting in a space with other musicians and songwriters and feeling like "we're in this together, man!" and like, then we all go out there and blaze the trail. But when we come together, it activates that love and the passion about making music–the creative process. And then the diversity of all the voices and all the styles and all the people. It's thrilling. So it probably feeds the artists in each of us to be around the diverse styles and sounds of each other.

For Brian, this sense of connection came in the form of audience members responding to themes in his music:

I have a song that was kind of more about grief and death that I wrote for my wife when her dad died… I don't think it's the best song I ever wrote. But I mean, I've had people come up and tell me that their child went through, you know, cancer treatments, then eventually hospice, and died. And that this was the song that they listened to so I have like, you know, grieving

parents come up and tell me this and–I don't even know what to do with that. Like, you just have to be gracious and say, Thank you. It feels good, but also like, just strange that something that you create can touch people's lives that you don't even know.

Teresa had a similar experience to Brian which motivated her to continue honing her craft and staying true to her purpose:

I really realized how impactful my music was when I did a [nationally-known concert outlet] show in [a larger city]. It was a group of about seven to eight women that came up to me after, and they had tears in their eyes, and they were like, "Oh my gosh, I never– I never heard a song like that!" I was like, wow, I don't know–I didn't know that my music was that impactful. So it gave me a lot of humility, because to me music gets really sacred. And it's something that is very natural for humans to exchange a song and like rhythm and just the feeling of it, even if you can't hear it is very strong. So I was like, wow, I'm really touching people's hearts and emotions, and that's nothing to sneeze at. I need to dig in and develop more.

What experiences continue to emerge in level III?

Level III, for all intents and purposes, is the participants' current level of temporal experience at time of interviewing. It is the embodied habitus in which they move about the world: flaws, aspirations, learned lessons and all. While many of the agency/structure dynamics mentioned previously still show up, over time participants found ways to increase their agency and make creative and relational decisions more aligned with their authenticity. However, experiences of confronting normative expectations, taking agentic action, feeling alienated, and transforming in community continue to emerge in different forms.

Interaction with normative expectations, level III. The salient forms of interacting with normative expectations for songwriters in the present were *attending to music industry standards* and *marketing required to exist in the domain.* For Heather, attending to industry standards involves keeping up with marketing standards. Building upon her earlier mention of marketing habits, she states some frustrations she has with this process:

It is like a whole other job. And I've taken classes and webinars and have memberships to things to study it. And it's really time consuming the way that my brain works. I get really detailed. And so it just feels like a slog to get into it and do it well would be a lot of work the

way that I operate. It feels annoying that I've put it off, it feels annoying that I'm missing out on probably stuff that would help my career. It feels annoying that it's almost required, you know, like as independent artists it's like this thing that we have to do if we're gonna thrive.

Aside from marketing, Heather describes how industry standards sometimes demand adjustment in approach, depending on the goals of the creative collaboration:

When I'm writing with a bigger major label artist, it's sometimes a little more strategic, like what does the label want to hear? What style of songs were we going for? Do you want this to be like a radio record? Or do you want it to be like a listening album? For your fans? And it doesn't matter about the marketability? We kind of think about those things.

Brian described how he resisted the social norms of what you were “supposed to do” as a songwriter, because he observed the ways in which pursuing this ideal frequently puts artists in precarious psychological or financial situations:

If you're trying to play by these rules, you've got to hire the $10,000 publicist, and you've got to have the $10,000 radio promoter. And all of these things are going to put you in this opening slot where you're getting paid 500 bucks for you and your band. And you've got to get to and from, you can't ride on the bus, you're following the bus to these venues. But you're playing in front of more people than most of the rest of us get to play in front of, but no amount of vinyl and T-shirts sold is going to make up for those gas costs and all the other costs, so you're going to lose money […] I think that there was a comment made “Man, how do people without generational wealth do this?” You know what, which is to say there's some truth that– there are a lot of people with generational wealth that do this and look fairly successful from the outside, but are losing money, but it doesn't matter because they got a trust fund that does exist. I would also posit that you make a choice, when you decide to follow this rule of what it looks like to be a touring musician and what success looks like. Because I drove around for a lot of years in a Honda Fit with my guitars. I'm getting 45 miles to the gallon. And I'm eating trail mix that I put together at home, and I'm sleeping on friends' couches, and then I'm playing a house concert in front of 50 people where I might make $2,000. And my expenses are like $100. So like I'm making more money than this person who is way more successful than I am, quote unquote. They're more popular than I'll ever be. But they're also actively posting, you know, about how nice it might be to kill yourself. It's like, you know… that seems like an odd trade. But I think a lot of people are kind of tied into this reality that like, this is how a thing is done. So therefore, you know, that's what I've got to do.

Sam describes the challenges of attending to industry standards when it comes to commercial releases:

I think it's annoying because the actual publication– there's like a window. There's a very, like, limited window of opportunity when you release a record to have some recouping of your

investment. And so, do that in a half-assed way, this is just a lost opportunity. Unless you release it in a different region in a different market altogether. But the fact that it's released means that the shot– It has been shot. So there's a lot that goes into it. There's a live performance. There's like, promotion online. There's promotion offline, and yeah, the actual production of the stage show is a whole 'nother ballgame. So that's why it's a pain in the ass. I stack a lot on the release.

Agentic action, level III. At level III, agentic action emerges as *intention setting and following through via prioritization* and *setting boundaries with who you collaborate with.* Sam described his intentional process of shifting from "promotion" to "attraction", and the ways to queer the normative approach through setting intentions and naming priorities:

Attraction versus promotion is like the idea that, like, if I infuse every artifact that's related to the actual sound with the intention behind the writing, and if I record it in a way that honors the songs themselves and fits the songs, and I release it in a way, and the performance reflects this. It's not like, oh, well–we need to be in a club, we need rock star lighting, and we need some guy who's hard of hearing to run sound. If I just scratch that model, and say, well, no, I'm going to do this in a theater, I'm going to do it in a park, or I'm going to do it in the backyard, or I'm gonna do it in a basement, like, whatever it is, it should reflect the spirit of the material that was recorded.

Teresa finds ways to make her visual marketing and general online engagement align with what she wants listeners to associate with her songs:

I do like to engage with people organically. And I do use social media very often, because you have to roll with the times. But yeah, the process is really like, How does the song make me feel? What colors do I see? What do I really want visually for people to see and attach to the song? I'll make that the focus.

In terms of setting boundaries as agentic action, Teresa learned over time that maintaining honesty and focusing on audience experience produces mutually beneficial collaborations:

So people have… different visions and there's no you know, roles or boundaries in place, that kind of creates a lot of issues. So that's the only time I've had weirdness is event planning, or sharing event space or something like that. That's why I don't do it. Like if I do an event, *I'm* doing it, and I'll just work with people that I know we can be honest with each other and focus on bettering the event, and it's not about who we are, it's about making sure people are comfortable and have a good time. It's been great since then, because before it was, like, clout-focused and lots of panic.

Alienation experiences, level III. One of the salient ways alienation emerged in level III was alienation caused by ***external/internal ego fixations*** that disconnect self & self and self & others. In the first passage, Heather describes how one dominating ego in the room ruins the creative process, and in the second passage, Teresa describes how an internal ego fixation on not being good enough caused problems earlier in her career and she continues to level out with:

> When there's a dominating voice, like a really loud–the loudest voice in the room–kind of taking over and pushing things at their pace and imposing the sense of "that's right" and "that's wrong." Like, that kills at all for me. I've been in the room with multiple writers and somebody will say "That's right. Yes, that's right." And I don't understand that language. It's like, what do you mean? No, there's this assumed sense that it has to fit somebody else's expectation that squashes the inspiration for me–like feeling like you're being sledge hammered by somebody's drive. Or even if they really care, it's because they care so much. But it feels really limiting.

> I definitely had an ego problem. Not like the arrogant one. It was the "I'm not good enough" One. It was that one. Yeah. People don't think of that as an ego problem. They think, you know, the arrogant cocky person. No, the other one is an ego problem too! Where you're like, [mopey] "Okay… and I just don't know how to speak up and I…" I had that bad! Like I didn't know how to speak up for myself, when I would get frustrated, it would be too much and it was just like over the top like blowing up about things because I'm constantly getting stomped on. I'm still leveling out but I'm much better.

Communal experiences, level III. Before going into two subthemes within level III communal experiences, I find it necessary to highlight an alienating experience that occurred within the community. Teresa described being booked for shows on account of her multiple intersecting marginalized identities and/or because her name would increase audience draw:

> I've been declining a lot of shows, because they're specifically just trying to fill in the inclusivity diversity box by picking one person that checks the multiple boxes. Like, "Oh, is she queer? Is she black? Is she indigenous? Is she, like…" I just check all those boxes for you? And I'm like, [annoyed] oookaaaay, because there was a point in time, where I was doing a lot of shows, but I noticed that I would be either the only person of color on the bill or the only woman on the bill, especially in hip hop shows. They'll choose me because I have hip hop elements, or my name is pretty popular, but not listen to my music or know what I'm about, and it doesn't make sense with the show. It's like, you have me on a bill with a whole bunch of rappers that just are wild [laughs]. They will have me on a bill with a whole bunch of people that our music–it doesn't complement each other. So that was a thing for a while, which was very annoying. But those are things that I've been avoiding by just staying to myself and planning my own events.

The first subtheme under communal experiences level III is ***personal transformation by "giving it away" to the community***. Heather describes this experience explicitly, in terms of sharing her story with a community of cancer survivors.

> With being a breast cancer survivor, I write songs about that experience, from the point of view of being someone who's gone through it and faced the hardest aspect of my whole life. And then the insights that I got out of the journey along the way, and that that was what mattered most to me. And I want to share that with people. I get personal transformation out of singing those songs, sometimes because it helps me feel even more rooted in what I went through and more on the other side of it. And I get to give it away and share it and really connect with others, because it's finally not about me anymore. It's about all of us. And you know, like that's what I love about music too. It does start from a personal place, but the listener is in it for themselves. So like, I love removing myself from the equation too.

In a similar vein, Brian wrote a song for a small town in a distant state, and derives personal transformation from visiting and playing it for the locals of the town:

> I wrote them this song about [town in another state]. And so when, I mean, I've played it every time I've been up there. And it's like everybody in the audience is from this town of like 3000 people. And I played in front of 400 of them over the course of a weekend. They come in, and we'll sing along with this song that is a true story about their town, and this bridge that was supposed to go to the airport that never got built. […] so I wrote this song […] and that feels very authentic to me. I've gotten to know this community. I go up there every year to play. It's one of my favorite places to play. It's one of my biggest audiences, maybe in the world that I routinely play in front of, and everybody that comes in there knows the words to that song and sings along with me when I sing it and it feels like that's the apex of what I want as I write. Like if that's the only connection I ever get ever again, that feels like it's enough, you know?

The last experience to explore in terms of the agency/structure dynamics through the levels is *community consensus empowering transformation*. First, Heather describes how she identifies with the communal nature of folk culture:

> I come from folk music. And there are a lot of places where folk music has created really big collective group gathering experiences with music. So there's a lot of festivals and conferences with folk music, where it's all about people coming together. And I love that beyond words, there's I don't know if it's a genre based if that's like a comfort space for me, but that genre, or if it's like the, what those songs tend to be about or where those songwriters tend to write from. It feels like heart music to me and social change and people who want, you know, they want goodness in the world.

In the following passage, Sam describes the communal support he receives from a songwriting group he is a part of. Brian and Heather are in this same group, which they refer to as a "game". Members are given a weekly prompt and the participants are challenged to write a song that includes the words of the prompt. Then, members can provide feedback on the songs.

> I do have a community that listens to my songs and responds to the phone demos. And in our group, we don't respond publicly, we send a private message like, wow, that was an amazing song. Holy crap. Wow. You know, it's only if you are blown away that you would respond to somebody, and writing a song a week 80 to 90 percent of them are shit. So, you know, it's really good to get that feedback from peers. Yeah, and you know, that you got something [...] I have a lot of good songs that I've written that I'm excited to report.

Table 1. *Themes and how they present as subthemes through the temporal levels.*

Themes	Level I subthemes	Level II subthemes	Level III subthemes
Interaction with normative expectations	– music industry myths that reproduce discouragement	– self in relationship with normative values	– attending to music industry standards – marketing required to exist within the domain
Agentic actions	– discovery of creative agency	– expressing identity through songs	– intention setting and following through via prioritization – setting boundaries with who you collaborate with
Alienation experiences	– facing the reality of imperfection	– split identity – alienation from family	– external/internal ego fixations
Communal experiences		– connection with community	– personal transformation by "giving it away" to community – community consensus empowering transformation

What were participants' aspirations for systems-level change?

One of the last questions I asked participants was if they had any recommendations for what various social infrastructures (venues, nightlife community, education, government, etc.) could do to improve their support of songwriters. Teresa described how she speaks to other artists in the community to gain consensus on what issues they are facing. A pattern emerged of local Black artists receiving grants that are creatively restricted by the agenda of their funders:

> I've talked to a lot of Black artists about that all the time. And it's like, I don't want to apply for a grant and flip my project into something that doesn't fully resonate with the intention of what I'm creating. And a lot of times we feel like we'll have to do that or we'll have to cut the corners of something that should be full and different. And cut it into size and fit it in a package, instead of presenting a really interesting idea that can break some barriers and actually do more justice for Black artists than just keeping it in a safe pocket of talking about one subject all the time. A lot of times they want us to talk about gentrification, and I'm like, yes, but… there are so many other things. So I have conversations with people like that.

Heather expressed the need for more support from the music industry in terms of artist support and compensation:

> I feel like the music industry itself is in the middle of a process of becoming much more supportive for songwriters. In terms of sharing resources, knowledge, tutorials, I feel like it's been bursting open for the last five years, at least, and then I think the pandemic kind of helped some of that too, in terms of sharing tools and resources online, because we're all isolated. In terms of getting support from those communities, like people buying your music. That's where we could use some support with, I think, how do you make money with your music when your art is the commodity but all the industry wants to give it away for free? We could use more support from the music industry. There are some initiatives, you know, but it's slow and tedious, sporadic you know, like trying to get artists rights and songwriting rights and higher royalties.

In response to what local governments can do to support songwriters, Sam reflected on the need for governments to recognize them as a significant cultural resource:

> Local government–like parks and rec of the city–could definitely support local music in a bigger way. State governments that supervise the arts could definitely follow the queue of some other states that have a state troubadour that tours and teaches writing and writes from a historical or cultural grounding in the state that they're from.

Brian, in his reflection on venues in particular, described some of the complexities of government funding and equitable distribution of resources:

> [The topic of] venues is complex, because there are some really good ones and there are some really terrible ones. And so you can't spend all your time and energy focusing on the terrible ones. During the pandemic, there was legislation to help out venues and to help out artists. And so like anything else, there were questions about like, well, if this money goes to the venues, how's that benefiting the artists? And I was privy to a lot of conversations that felt very general. We're making kind of generalizations about like, well, if "the venues" get… and like every venue is just somebody who owns a building or rents a building and sells beer, you know, it's not like the idea that we're going to have some kind of blanket structure. I feel like sometimes we approach a lot of things in this country, maybe aspirationally as though they were social constructs–or constructs of socialism–and they're just absolutely not.

Reflections from level zero

After a wistful question-dance of sociology and songwriting–theory and storytelling–let us now take a moment to breathe, stretch, and "sit with the shit" in the uninhabited, liminal space of level zero[7]. As I emerge from this research process: from these theories and from this rich storied data, I can't help but reflect on what I would do differently if I were to conduct this study again, and name some of the structural limitations that made the data and analysis less rich than it could have been.

First of all, I'd like to point out that Teresa mentioned how she feels discomforted being the only person of color on a performance bill, and that's exactly what occurred with the lineup of participants for this study. If I would do this in future, I would not only bring on more participants–10-12 at least–I would ensure that cultural experiences were diverse and equitably distributed in participant demographics to avoid people feeling tokenized. Other limitations are the amount of time spent in contact with the participants and the lack of participant compensation. If I were to conduct this study again, I would apply for funding so that the songwriters could be compensated for their time. Within that context, I would either make the semi-structured interviews a bit longer (approximately two hours) and/or observe them while working or performing to collect embodied ethnographic data. I would also work more closely with the participants in the writing process, devising a method to give participants more ownership of the overall storytelling.

Moving on from the study's limitations, I will now present some recommendations for recognizing or alleviating songwriter alienation. In terms of young songwriters, I recommend

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[7] Level 0 is an expansive non-Euclidean space, resembling the back rooms of a commercial building…no two rooms within the level are identical in layout… Linear space in Level 0 is altered drastically; it is possible to walk in a straight line, return to the starting point, and end up in a completely different set of rooms than the ones previously traversed… (https://backrooms.fandom.com/wiki/Level_0).

discussing grand narratives of the music industry in realistic terms–perhaps deconstructing ideas of fame and clout by asking questions. "What do *you* like about songwriting?" "What do you think it takes to be a professional songwriter?" "What does fame mean to you?" "Why is clout important to you?" I think that asking young people to reflect on some of these questions– and have adults with settled nervous systems affirm their non-dominant narratives–is vital to fostering healthy and sustainable practices as a professional songwriter.

In terms of young adult and career songwriters, who in this study suffered from split identity and cut-off from family, it's important to affirm these relational experiences as they emerge, and not downplay the significance of them. For instance, operating with songwriters on the level of "just keep your head down and hustle" ignores the deeply relational and communal aspects of the work. We should also recognize that sometimes songs that express authenticity might be enjoyable to listen to on one level–but at the same time they can be cries for help, or an expression of unexpressed anguish. In my case, songs I wrote in high school were often explicitly about feeling isolated and alienated, and people just sang along without asking me about the experiences the songs were rooted in. We should provide care for the emotional taxation of professional songwriters–who put forth significant emotional and physical labor in their work– in the same way we show concern for nurses, doctors, teachers, and caregivers. Songwriters are emotional laborers working within a dehumanizing system and they require everyone's support to thrive.

One last recommendation for songwriters in general: seek out a group or community that encourages you to improve your craft and offers genuine feedback. If you can't seem to find one, create one! According to the data gathered here, finding a supportive community can be a persistent challenge, but in the end it's worth the trial and error process. For music therapists, I

believe the findings here advocate for a more communal and systems-dependent understanding of "healthy" songwriting processes. Music therapists can create opportunities for communal sharing and songwriting in the community through resource-oriented or community music therapy methods, like organizing community concerts that are trauma informed, sensory friendly, and that intentionally encourage audience participation with the performers.

What about songwriters' lived experiences should be explored next? Personally I would love to research how alienation shows up in particular ways for different cultural groups: like how it emerges specifically for Black artists within a white supremacist system, how women experience misogyny in community music making, or how transgender songwriters navigate cis-heteronormativity in the industry. This process would utilize a similar framework but include more specific questions about how racial capitalist systems impact artists from different cultural groups in unique ways.

Before wrapping up, I would like to name some aspirations I hope readers take away from this study. This study could serve as a map for young songwriters, highlighting at least five possible routes of a songwriting journey–a journey clearly directed by intentionality and creative agency, while also constantly confronting narratives and structures which at times support, and at other times constrain, creative action. This study could be affirming for mid-life songwriters: reading the narratives of other songwriters might foster empathy and a less competitive mindset in the "songwriting market" and at the community level. I hope this study is especially helpful for music therapists–who often utilize other artists' songs–to embody a deeper reverence for the lived experience that undergirds the songs that they "use in interventions". While clearly there is value in understanding the lived experiences of our clients, I invite that we also consider the lived experiences and material conditions that the songs that we "use" emerged from.

The author expires an existential sigh that pangs deep into the gut. I've never been good with endings. As a child I loved reading but would often start another book without ever knowing how the last one ended. I spent hours creating intricate custom board games designed for multiple players, but rarely did I end up playing them with others. Now I find myself about to finish an arduous educational process that has unfolded over six years–from undergrad classes in 2017, to undergraduate internship 2018, to graduate classes in 2020, to a graduate internship in 2020-2021, to moving away from music therapy and embracing political economy and critical theory. It feels like several lifetimes ago I first thought it was a good idea to pursue music therapy, and through all of this shedding and shedding and shedding and shedding, I don't regret a thing. My creativity has gone through several cycles of birth, death, and rebirth, and as I wrap up this–my most daunting creative pursuit to date–I feel my body breathing itself as I await the next experience in my creative journey.

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Appendix A: Semi-structured interview questions

1. Please describe your songwriting process from "conception" to "public release".
    a. Does this change depending on the subject matter? If so, please say more about this.
    b. Does this change depending on whether you are writing alone or in collaboration with others? If so, please say more about this.
2. A lot of the work of a songwriter has nothing to do with writing songs. Tell me about some of the non-musical work you do on a regular basis to maintain your life and your craft (administrative/networking/promotion).
3. Describe how meaningful your songs are to you. Are there some that hold more meaning for you? If so, why?
4. Describe how meaningful your songs are to others.
    a. In the community
    b. Other musicians
    c. Friends
    d. Family
5. Have you experienced your songs as vehicles for personal or social transformation? If so, please say more about this.
6. Has your songwriting work altered your material reality in any way? For example, gains or losses in financial income but also things like moving to a different place to pursue songwriting/performing.
7. Describe any challenges you may experience maintaining a balance between your art process and maintaining your relationships.

8. Please describe the sense of camaraderie you experience with other songwriters & musicians around you. Next, please describe any tension or disconnection you may feel between you and other songwriters & musicians around you.
9. Tell me about the songwriting collaboration that felt the best for you.
    a. What material conditions comprised the "best feeling" collaboration?
    b. [To put it another way, how did money & capital impact the collaboration… What were the financial power dynamics involved in the exchange]
10. Tell me about the songwriting collaboration that felt the worst for you.
    a. What material conditions comprised the "worst feeling" collaboration?
    b. [To put it another way, how did money & capital impact the collaboration… What were the financial power dynamics involved in the exchange]
11. We have various social systems around us: Family, Local Community, Peer community, The Music Business at large, venue/nightlife communities, Educational institutions. What social systems do you feel support your musical endeavors? Are there ways in which each system could improve upon their support?
12. Is there anything else you would like to share about moments you experience a deep sense of authenticity in your songwriting?

Using Probes: To prompt additional information if little is given, the researcher will use probes including "tell me more" and "can you clarify".

Appendix B: Agentic and Non-agentic objects in the four dimensions of songwriting

Table 2. *Possible agentic and non-agentic objects within the four dimensions of songwriting practice, comprising the present study's understanding of objects in each dimension that may be alienated or integrated, resulting in the"agency/structure dynamics" described on pp. 54-68.*

Songwriting system	Songwriting Skills (effort/labor)	Songwriting Resources (means/capital)	Songwriting Culture (environment/fellows)	Songwriting Process (creativity/entrepreneurship)
Agentic objects *(subjective actors)*	Songwriter as laborer	Collaborators who deliberately contribute social, cultural, and/or financial capital to the songwriting process	Contemporaries, critics, listeners, fans, teachers, and influencers who act within the songwriting culture broadly (may or may not collaborate directly)	Songwriter as artist
Non-Agentic objects *(structures, concepts, artifacts, etc.)*	Musicianship, creative writing, collaboration, groove, marketing, performance	Financial resources, studio time/costs, instruments, educational scaffolding, physical materials	Cultural artifacts, cultural rituals, geographic location, ecological conditions	Authenticity, taste, creativity, uniqueness